America

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Praying With Art

Karen Sue Smith

Richard J. Regan on
A Federal Solution for Iraq

Of Many Things

A COLD RAIN. That's the worst kind of winter weather. We have had a lot of cold rain this winter in New York. Even what little snow we have had seems to switch over to rain before the storm passes. More than any amount of snow, it makes me want to flee south to the tropics or southwest to the desert. Melville's Ishmael speaks of times when it is "damp, drizzly November in my soul." Along the east coast south of Boston, that's the kind of winter it has been—"damp, drizzly November," now heading into its fifth month.

Snow, at least, gives you half a chance to battle back, with the right outerwear, shoveled walks and snowmelt. But the rain wins out as soon as you step out the door. If your shoes and trousers are not drenched through in a block or two, clogged drains at the corners and drivers careless of the pedestrian's plight assure that you get soaked. Getting a cab on a cold, rainy day is nigh on impossible. I have a pair of Gore-Tex lined walkers, but they give no protection against water seeping in along the cuffs and down the socks into the shoes in the driving rain or after a car splashes by. Sometimes a subway stop is near, sometimes not; but most times it is not near enough to keep from getting wet. And once wet, you must endure it until you reach someplace where you are able to change, if you have the wherewithal to change at all.

In the summertime or on a warm spring day, walking in the rain can be a pleasure, but a winter rain is different. It is a reminder that against nature, you really don't have a chance. There is no escape, and the consequences can go on for hours. When it is cold enough, in the mid-30s, winter rain sends a chill to penetrate the bones. We are at the weather's mercy.

Snow, by contrast, gives us a fighting chance. One of the less-acknowledged attractions of snow is that it provides us with attainable challenges. You can shovel out the walk and driveway, dig out the car parked along the curb. Walking becomes a test of stamina and sometimes balance, when snow turns to ice. Most of the time, you can deal with the snow. It can even be an asset. Hikers can insulate their tents with snow; Eskimos on the trail can build igloos, and backcountry skiers snow caves. When snow drives us indoors, the fireside seems more cozy and the hot chocolate more appetizing than when we seek refuge from a cold rain. When we retreat from the rain, the gloom still seems to hang around us; but when you come in from the snow, you enter a world of warmth and light.

Freezing rain, of course, is often the worst thing winter can throw at us. It can also make life desperately hard, tearing down powerlines and thrusting people into cold and darkness for weeks on end. When the great ice storm of 1998 hit the northeastern United States and southeastern Canada, whole forests were turned to matchsticks. An ice storm reminds us that nature is master. Yet if freezing rain falls in the early hours before a bright dawn, it can make for a dazzling landscape that delights the eye.

In the East, where I learned to ski, ice-coated slopes and snow turned to ice by a freeze following on a rain are commonplace. Perhaps the worst conditions in which I ever skied were on Whiteface Mountain in the Adirondacks. The crust was so thick that the snow groomers had only chopped the surface into baseball-sized chunks of ice. It was hard even to think of what we were doing as skiing at all. They say, though, that skiing in conditions like those is what makes eastern skiers more successful than westerners at the annual race around Europe's Mont Blanc. Skiing on ice teaches you to ski with more control—a small, unexpected blessing, I suppose, of freezing rain.

Another time, I was skiing Mont Ste.-Anne in Quebec with some French Canadian friends. It rained for three solid days. Finally the weather broke, and we went for the top. Of course, the top third of the mountain was ice. The first two runs went just fine. The descent from the lift, however, took a hard, blind right turn. On the third trip, as I made the turn I hit a block of ice fallen in the track. I fell against the ice wall. I saw stars. Then I felt the warm drip of blood down the side of my face. It was a freak accident. The ice had nearly severed my earlobe. Winter rain is nature's treachery.

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America

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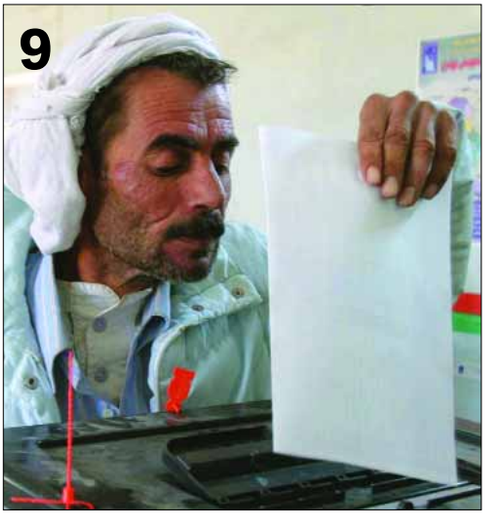

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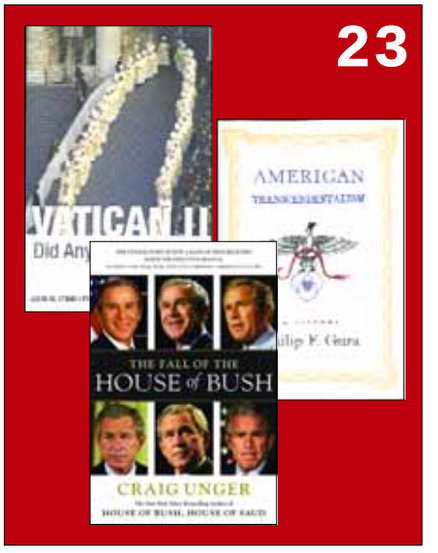


This week @ America Connects

Karen Sue Smith on how to pray with art, and part 2 of our podcast on the best films of 2007. Plus, William J. O'Malley, S.J., on "Understanding Reconciliation," at americamagazine.org.

Told in a Flash

How short a story is too short? When it comes to contemporary fiction, the limit keeps dropping, particularly as the Internet encourages the growth of "microfiction," complete tales that are often startlingly brief—sometimes 100 words or less. Also known as "flash fiction," the genre dates from the days of cuneiform tablets but has grown more popular in recent years, in part because many Americans do most of their reading from a computer screen, a medium that encourages single-page texts and also inhibits portability. Our growing use of instant messaging and phone texts has also whetted our appetite for the short and punchy.

Or is the popularity of this literary form simply another example of our diminishing attention span? One need only pick up any popular newsweekly from the 1950s to see the difference in length, complexity of argument and literary polish from that era to our own (note also that the average item on **America**'s Current Comment page is only 250 words long, which means that this self-deprecating aside has cost us 13 percent of our precious word count). For whatever reason, as a culture we are embracing brevity. The heyday of the 8,000-word article is long past; so too may be the era of 5,000-word short stories. (For links to microfiction Web sites, visit americamagazine.org/microfiction.cfm.)

Enthusiasts of microfiction must still kneel before the master, however. Literary legend holds that eight decades ago, Ernest Hemingway was challenged to write a complete short story in only six words. His rejoinder? "For Sale: Baby shoes, never worn."

Australia's Apology

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on Feb. 13 issued a national apology to Australia's indigenous peoples, in particular to the so-called Stolen Generations. "We reflect…we apologize…we say sorry," he repeated, for the mistreatment, the suffering and hurt of the Stolen Generations. It is estimated that from 1910 to the 1970s, 100,000 indigenous children were taken from their parents to new homes or institutions—some of them run by Christian churches—where they were not allowed to speak their language, nor in many cases even to see their families again. In the peak years of the 1920s and 1950s, one in three indigenous childen were removed in this way. This first act of Mr. Rudd's Labor government, on national television, brought a standing ovation from members of parliament and cheers and tears from millions.

Mr. Rudd's apology included a look to a better future, but he ruled out setting up a government fund to compensate the victims, a move called for by many Aboriginal leaders. But this apology is a first step in the right direction. He promised to ensure that within five years every four-year-old Aboriginal child would attend kindergarten. On this landmark day, Australians were justly proud of this willingness to look honestly at their history and make amends.

Coming at the beginning of the Christian period of Lent, Mr. Rudd's action reminds one of the public apology of Pope John Paul II on the First Sunday of Lent in the year 2000 for offenses perpetrated by Catholics during the last millennium. Australia's apology also serves to remind the United States and other nations of the grace-filled possibilities that lie beyond denial of past and present actions against minority groups and the weakest members of society.

Darfur's Displaced People

The conflict in Darfur has displaced over 2.5 million people. Most are living in huge refugee camps "the size of cities," according to a report by Amnesty International. Others live across the border in eastern Chad, where a dozen camps shelter over a quarter of a million people fleeing the ongoing violence. Since 2003, more than 200,000 people have died from conflict-related causes.

The report, *Displaced in Darfur: A Generation of Anger*, notes that armed groups are using the camps—in both Darfur and Chad—to recruit young fighters. With virtually nothing available in terms of work or education, some youths are joining these armed groups. Tawanda Hondora, deputy director of Amnesty's Africa program, has noted that most camps are awash with weapons. As a result, security inside and around the camps is deteriorating. In some, $25 can buy a handgun. Consequently, robberies and assaults within the camps have multiplied. Women are increasingly at risk of rape both in the camps and when they venture out in search of firewood.

Complicating the situation is the fact that some camps include members of more than two dozen ethnic groups, and many youths form vigilante gangs based on ethnic origin. Amnesty urges that steps be taken to ensure that the government of Sudan removes impediments to the complete deployment of the U.N.-African Union forces in Darfur, which now are needed not only to bring stability to the region, but to protect the camps' increasingly threatened civilians.

Editorial

King Coal

COAL IS NOW USED to generate half the electricity consumed in the United States, and its use is likely to grow as efforts are made to reduce dependence on foreign oil. Coal-powered plants, however, create carbon dioxide, a main contributor to global warming. It is estimated that coal-fired plants create 40 percent of all carbon dioxide emissions in the United States. The plants also emit sulfur dioxide, which contributes to the acid rain that has harmed forests and lakes and is a significant factor in respiratory ailments.

It is not surprising, with the Bush administration's pro-industry posture, that little is done to limit the damage caused by coal production to both the environment and human health. The administration has generally favored powerful coal interests, which make large donations to candidates and political parties. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, almost 70 percent of coal companies' donations have gone to the Republican Party, though Congressional Democrats have also benefited. Environmental and health advocates, moreover, have been critical of what they see as patronage appointments to the Mine Safety and Health Administration.

Although environmental and human damage is evident wherever coal is mined and processed, few areas of the nation show the ravages as clearly as the Appalachian states. There the main mining method is mountaintop removal, which means literally blasting off the tops of mountains to reach the seams of coal beneath. The environmental damage has been great. Debris dumped from the former mountain tops has buried valleys and more than 1,000 miles of streams and waterways.

Instead of strengthening laws to shield the Appalachian countryside and local communities from human and environmental damage, the administration has taken steps to weaken existing protections. A regulation that went into effect in August 2007, for example, allows mountaintop removal to continue, on the condition that mine operators cause as little environmental damage as possible. Environmentalists, though, have said that the plan amounts to making waterway pollution legal by exempting coal mine wastes from a 1983 regulation known as the buffer zone rule, which prohibits surface coal-mining activities from disturbing areas within 100 feet of streams. Matthew Wasson, conservation director of Appalachian Voices, told **America** that the 1983 rule stemmed from lawsuits filed by families and communities near the mines. The new exemption, sought by the administration, is part of an effort to avoid compliance with the Clean Water Act. Environmentalists regard the buffer zone rule as among the few protections streams and valleys have from being buried by mountaintop removal operations.

Although most of the more easily accessible coal has already been mined, mountaintop removal nevertheless continues because of huge government subsidies. Dr. Wasson noted that the billions in subsidies "make it economical for coal companies to keep on producing." If the matter were left to the free market, he added, "you wouldn't see mountaintop removal—it's moving 20 tons of earth for one ton of coal, which except for the subsidies, wouldn't be economical at all."

The bulk of the nation's coal supply is now coming from the West, and over 100 new coal-burning power plants are in the planning stage. Not all states, however, are happy about them. A Kansas state agency refused an air permit for two, and opinion polls there found that two-thirds of those questioned opposed the plants. Similarly, in Montana new coal-fired plants in the Great Plains portion of the state have faced opposition, including criticism by ranchers concerned about the impact on their water supply.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES, like converting coal to liquid for easier transportation, are among more recent approaches in the search for clean energy. The process involves heating coal to 1,000 degrees and mixing it with water. This requires huge amounts of water, however, and the cost of a plant would likely reach the billions. Adding to its dubious practicability is the fact that it would increase greenhouse gas emissions, because the liquification of coal releases large amounts of carbon dioxide. Proponents claim that the carbon dioxide could be stored underground through so-called carbon sequestration. But again, huge costs would be involved and the procedure has yet to be tried. Dr. Wasson sees these new technologies as "a step in the wrong direction."

For Wasson and many environmentalists, the wiser route would involve investing in wind and solar energy, "painless measures that would cost less than what we're now spending in subsidies for the coal industry." Unfortunately, he went on, the issue is not about a lack of alternatives to coal use, but rather "a powerful set of vested interests that have a strong incentive to keep us on the current track," that is, ever greater use of coal. Congress should back clean energy options more forcefully and resist the coal industry's push for increased production and, as its consequence, more pollution.

Glendon Arrives as New U.S. Ambassador in Rome

Mary Ann Glendon

The new U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, Mary Ann Glendon, arrived in Rome Feb. 15 and said she looked forward to working with the Vatican on issues of religious freedom and religious tolerance. Glendon, a Harvard University law professor, has served with Vatican agencies and diplomatic missions in the past. She said she hoped that experience would help her advance U.S.-Vatican relations in her new post. The United States and the Vatican have a "common commitment to the human dignity of every man, woman and child," she told reporters. "Both the United States and the Holy See have a long history in which faith and reason are inseparably united in that quest," she said. Glendon said the United States works for human dignity by "vigorously promoting human rights and religious freedom and by striving to foster dialogue and tolerance among persons of different faiths and cultures." As ambassador, she said, she expects to work with the Vatican "to advance those lofty goals."

Desire for Clarification On Good Friday Prayer

The Rabbinical Assembly of Conservative Judaism has asked for clarification from the Vatican as to whether a revised Good Friday prayer for the Jews in Latin calls for the conversion of Jews. The new prayer replaces the one contained in the 1962 Roman Missal, sometimes called the Tridentine Mass, which is no longer generally used by Catholics but which may be used by some church communities under recently revised norms. Pope Benedict XVI has reformulated the Good Friday prayer for the Jews, removing language about the "blindness" of the Jews, but it asks for prayers for the Jews and that "with the fullness of peoples entering your church, all Israel may be saved." Some Jewish leaders criticized the phrasing as a call for Jews to accept Christianity. A Feb. 14 resolution by the Rabbinical Assembly said that it "is dismayed and deeply disturbed to learn of reports that Pope Benedict XVI has revised the 1962 text of the Latin liturgy." It said, "Be it resolved that the Rabbinical Assembly seeks clarification from the Vatican of the meaning and status of the new text for the Latin liturgy."

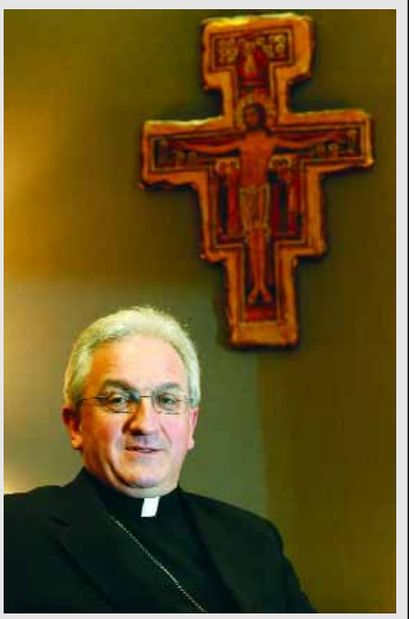
Castro's Stormy Relations With Cuban Church

During nearly 50 years of rule, Fidel Castro had an often stormy relationship with the Catholic Church in Cuba. The Jesuit-educated Castro was as comfortable countering the Cuban church as an institutional force during the early years of his revolution in the 1960s as he was bantering casually with Pope John Paul II during the papal visit to Cuba in 1998. The 81-year-old Cuban leader announced Feb. 19 that he was retiring as head of the island nation. He had temporarily ceded power to his younger brother, Raul Castro, in July 2006, after undergoing surgery because of intestinal bleeding—but he never returned to office, ending more than 49 years of continuous rule. He came to power on the Caribbean island Jan. 1, 1959 after leading a successful guerrilla rebellion against the unpopular dictator Fulgencio Batista.

Saints' Causes Need More Careful Study

In a new set of rules encouraged by Pope Benedict XVI, the Vatican is requiring dioceses to be more meticulous and objective when they prepare local sainthood causes. The new norms do not introduce revolutionary changes in the existing process, but they reduce the possibility of error and require better documentation in order to avoid carelessness or even, in the Vatican's words, "fraud or deception." The rules are contained in a 45-page instruction made public in February by the Congregation for Saints' Causes. The instruction revises the procedures used by dioceses to recognize and investigate potential saints before forwarding their causes to Rome. The instruction covers everything from the medical investigation of miraculous cures to the interrogation of favorable and unfavorable witnesses. Above all, it urges those investigating the life of a would-be saint to act with utmost impartiality and avoid whitewashing any personal faults or negative aspects that might emerge.

Pope's Visit to U.N. 'Eagerly Awaited'



Pope Benedict XVI's April 18 visit to the United Nations "is eagerly awaited, because the pope is seen as a moral authority offering clear guidance on the foundational values of life and of human society," said the Vatican's U.N. ambassador, Archbishop Celestino Migliore. "In this sense the pope is considered an authority able to interpret and rally political will to work for the good of the international community," he said. Asked how U.N. member nations regard the Catholic Church, Archbishop Migliore said they respect the church's "contribution to keep alive, nurture and refresh the dimension of spirituality and transcendence, without which our society would fall apart."

Iraqi Christians Seek Political Voice

Christians in northern Iraq have been setting up a 30-member council to give themselves a political voice, said Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Louis Sako of Kirkuk, Iraq. He said the plan for the council was in its final stages and had the backing of Iraq's President Jalal Talabani. "For too long, the Christians have struggled to get their views heard in the main debates of the day because so often they don't speak with one voice," the archbishop told Aid to the Church in Need, a Catholic charity helping persecuted Christians. "The main purpose is that Christians should have a united front," he said from Kirkuk in a Feb. 18 telephone interview. "If we have demands, we should present them together. We should not be separated and thereby enfeebled." The archbishop, who will be the first president of the council, added that in early February he had discussed the plans with Talabani, who responded favorably.

Kentucky Bishops On Faithful Citizenship

The bishops of Kentucky's four Catholic dioceses urged the state's Catholics to take a close look at life issues when voting. "All human laws must be measured against the natural law engraved in our hearts by the Creator," said the bishops in a pastoral letter, *Reverence for Life: Conscience and Faithful Citizenship.* "Our religious beliefs affirm basic human rights and obligations that are essential to the fabric of our social life. In particular, respect for human life is numbered among those basic values that underpin the very foundation of civilization," they said. "What we profess in defense of the sacredness of unborn human life harmonizes with our historic legal tradition founded on the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," they said. "Abortion on demand does not." *Reverence for Life* was issued Jan. 22, the 35th anniversary of the Supreme Court decisions in Roe v. Wade and Doe v. Bolton that legalized abortion.

From CNS and other sources. CNS photos.

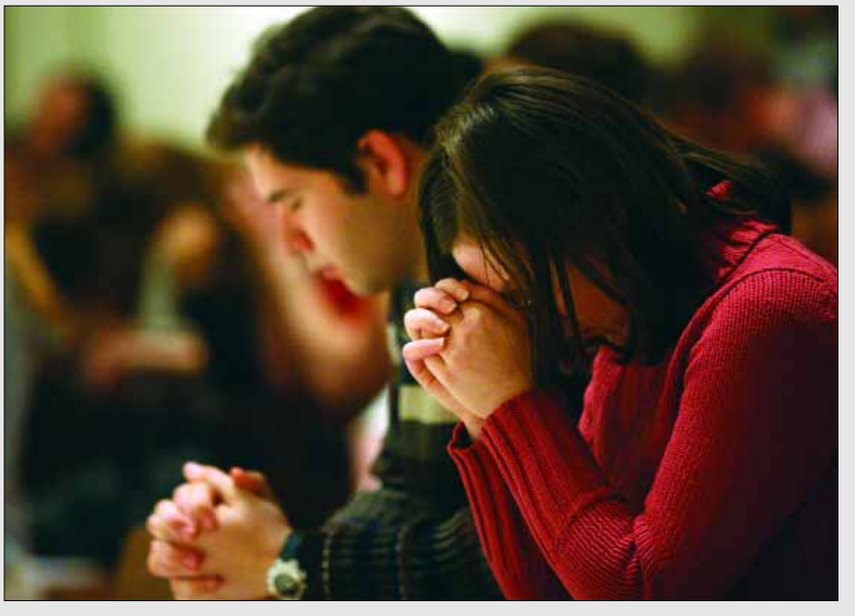
Bishops Criticize Federal Raid Policies

Homeland Security workplace raids to detain illegal immigrants should not take place near churches, schools, health centers or other places providing charitable social services, said the U.S. bishops. "An environment of fear and distrust is fostered that may prevent immigrants and their family members from practicing their faith, taking their children to school or accessing needed medical and social services," they said in a letter to Michael Chertoff, secretary of Homeland Security. The Feb. 11 letter was signed by Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Migration, and Coadjutor Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, Calif., chairman of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network.

Renowned Jesuit Theologian Dies

Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., long regarded as one of the U.S. Catholic Church's top theologians and preachers, died Feb. 16 at the Jesuit infirmary on the campus of St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. He was 93 years old. A funeral Mass was celebrated Feb. 20 at Holy Trinity Church in Washington, D.C. Interment was at the Jesuit cemetery in Woodstock, Md., where his longtime teaching colleagues John Courtney Murray, S.J., and Gustave Weigel, S.J., are also buried.

Using as a base his 45-year tenure as managing editor and then editor in chief of the journal Theological Studies, Father Burghardt wrote and preached on a wide variety of church issues. After retiring from Theological Studies, he began a new initiative called Preaching the Just Word. In a 1994 address Father Burghardt said he planned to spend "just about every hour that remains to me" on the project, leading Ignatian-style retreats around the nation to revivify Catholic preaching. "Our homilies must be set aflame," he said, and that can come only with "a conversion that turns the preacher inside out."



Daniel Zundel and Melissa Otter, students at Loyola University, pray during a Mass at the university's Madonna Della Strada Chapel in Chicago Feb. 15. Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago and Bishop J. Peter Sartain of Joliet, Ill., celebrated the ninth annual Mass for college students living and studying at campuses in the Chicago and Joliet dioceses. Special prayers and intentions were said for the shooting victims from Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Ill., where a former graduate student killed five students and wounded at least 16 before committing suicide Feb. 14.

The Green Isle

'We focus on recycling waste; the Irish focus on reducing it.'

WE CAN LEARN a few things from the Irish. No, I'm not talking about the laudable contributions of Irish literature, music, peace in Northern Ireland, their economic miracle or even all the fuss about saving civilization. We can learn from practical and successful Irish approaches to greening the Emerald Isle.

Twenty years ago the principal Irish export was its people. A whopping 20 percent unemployment rate forced the Irish to leave in search of opportunity. Today, while many of its neighbors restrict immigration, Ireland has opened its labor markets; and English, Polish, Latvian, Lithuanian, Chinese and Nigerian workers are helping power the Irish economic boom. The Celtic Tiger has been the envy of Europe. A fine educational system and high productivity rates attract substantial foreign direct investment.

But as economic growth rates, employment and prosperity have soared in Ireland, so have consumption, construction and environmental degradation. Municipal waste increased 65 percent since 1995. Urban development grew 31 percent between 1990 and 2000. Water quality in coastal areas suffered. Suddenly the Emerald Isle was not so green.

In a country with a vibrant tourism sector, environmental downturns have economic as well as health and ascetic consequences. So the Irish got busy not only managing the mountains of waste but trying to prevent them. In the United States we focus on recycling, while the Irish focus on reduction. The Irish Environmental Protection Agency declared waste prevention a top priority and currently is developing a National Waste Prevention Program. As Tony Killeen, minister of state with special responsibility for environment and energy, explained on Feb. 7, Ireland aims "at changing existing waste disposal practices, reducing unnecessary volumes of waste, whether it be food waste, farm, plastics or packaging materials as well as encouraging reuse."

A practical example of waste prevention is the so-called plastax. Five years ago Ireland began taxing that symbol and scourge of modern consumer life, the omnipresent plastic carrier bag. Around the world over a billion of these "free" plastic bags are given away in shops and markets every day, over a million a minute according to reusablebags.com. Only 1 percent to 3 percent of these are recycled.

Recycling does not work because the bags are made of such low-quality plastic that it costs more to recycle them than they are worth. Thus many of those collected for recycling contribute instead to pollution. The bags end up dumped and/or incinerated in developing countries with lax environmental laws. The bags take more than 1,000 years to break down. In the meantime they litter the landscape, choke streams and sewer systems, causing flooding, and kill the animals and marine life who eat either the whole bags or the small pieces they break into, which are mistaken for food.

These "free" bags are not free, but their costs are shifted and borne by the public and the environment. Ireland imposed a tax equivalent to 33 cents per bag, with dramatic and immediate results. Usage dropped 94 percent within months, and approximately 10 million euros a year are generated for environmental clean-up programs.

Other countries and municipalities have followed suit, with mixed results. In Bombay the police raid manufacturing factories and shops that use them. Bangladesh, Taiwan and Singapore also ban the bags. But because of poor enforcement and low public support, not all of these measures have worked.

The success in Ireland was due to several key factors. Government capacity was in place to monitor and enforce the measure. Stores already had structures in place to calculate and collect taxes (computers and cash registers), so implementing the plastax was easy. A successful advertising and public education campaign changed people's ideas about the bags. While the bags are not banned, they are now shunned as "uncool," like fur coats. A tough Environmental Secretary was committed to the process and closed potential loopholes, making it illegal for stores to pay the tax for customers, and threatening the same tax if stores switched to paper rather than decreasing waste. Even recycled paper bags are not environmentally friendly.

Contrary to the common impression, free markets are not free. They work only in a system of law and price incentives that shape behavior. In the United States we use the tax code to encourage home ownership, but we are slow to use the tax code or other incentives to protect the environment. The process is called environmental accounting, and it is controversial. Many economists argue that it is too difficult to factor the costs of environmental damage into prices or accounting measures like the G.N.P., so they would rather not try. Some environmentalists object that "green taxes" legitimate destructive environmental practices, allowing the rich to pollute for a fee, and insist that some values, like a clean planet, are priceless. Americans seem to feel driving gas-guzzling cars is a natural right, so we do not follow the example of other countries and impose stiff gasoline taxes or taxes on Hummers that would more accurately reflect the costs to the public and the planet.

St. Patrick's Day is big business in the United States. Americans spend almost $4 billion on green gear and decorations, according to the National Retail Federation. Instead of consuming more, let's follow the Irish example, and not just wear green but be green.

Maryann Cusimano Love

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An Iraqi man casts his ballot at a polling station in the northern city of Kirkuk, Iraq, Dec. 15.

PHOTO CNS/REUTERS

What a postwar Iraqi government might look like

A Federal Solution for Iraq?

– BY RICHARD J. REGAN –

AMERICAN VOTERS COMMUNICATED a clear message to the Bush administration in the November 2006 elections: withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq as soon as possible. Should a Democratic candidate be elected president this coming November, he or she would almost certainly draw down U.S. forces in Iraq as a prelude to complete withdrawal. Another Republican president, facing political pressure and the high cost of continued military involvement in Iraq, would probably do much the same. Facing this reality, Iraqi lead-

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ers should seriously consider adopting a federal system of government to replace their current political structure, a weak unitary state.

Three different structures for Iraq are under discussion: a unitary state, complete partition and a federal system. The Bush administration, most academic specialists and the bipartisan Iraq Study Group favor a unitary state. Many others, however, including Peter Galbraith, a former U.S. ambassador to Croatia, favor partitioning Iraq into three independent nations (Sunni Arab, Shiite and Kurdish). Senator Joseph Biden, a former presidential candidate, and others have proposed something in between: a loose federation formed by three autonomous regions (Sunni Arab, Shiite and Kurdish). In late September 2007, the U.S. Senate adopted a resolution in favor of a federal system of government for Iraq. Kurdish groups and one Shiite party endorsed the resolution, but the Iraqi government, Sunni Arabs, and most Shiites condemned it.

Before American military withdrawal begins in the next few years, Iraq must face the political problem of how to constitute a lasting governmental system.

What would a federal solution entail? Any attempt to create a federal system for Iraq requires that a number of theoretical and practical issues be spelled out and explored. In a confederal union, for example, each region would be sovereign and could unilaterally veto collective action, much like the early years of the United States under the Articles of Confederation, or like nations with veto power in the U.N. Security Council. In a federal union, however, with sovereignty divided among the federal government and local regions, both the central government and the local regions would be supreme in their respective spheres of jurisdiction. This is the system of the United States under the Constitution. A confederal union would need to negotiate bilateral or trilateral cooperative agreements among regions and would need no structural arrangements except to facilitate specific agreements. By contrast, a federal union needs a permanent structural framework.

Distributing Power

Any federal system of government poses questions about which powers belong to the central government, which to the regions, and which are shared by both but subject to federal supremacy. Some powers, including authority over foreign relations, war and tariffs, typically would be part of the national sovereignty of the federal government. The federal government would also have power over currency, banking and interregional and international transportation systems. Some powers, such as regulation of commerce, could be shared with local regions though subject to federal supremacy. But the so-called police powers (regarding domestic peace and security, health, welfare and morals) should be reserved exclusively to regional authorities. While the Iraqi federal government could use regional militias to secure international borders, it would need a centralized army, navy and air force to defend the nation against potentially aggressive neighbors. As a minority, Sunni Arabs would worry about the composition and stationing of such armed forces, but international borders and reserve areas could be federalized, and federal troops could be prohibited from entering regional territory except when necessary to enforce federal law or when a regional executive requested their assistance.

How could such a federation resolve internal disputes? The United States and other federal systems typically rely on a supreme court; the system is buttressed by a general consensus concerning the rule of law and an independent judiciary. Whether this is possible in Iraq is doubtful at best. One possibility would be a council composed of an equal number of representatives from all three regions; the council could consider the constitutional objections of regions against federal laws or actions, and of the federal government against regional laws or actions.

Authority and Individual Rights

Under the present Iraqi constitution, the system of government is parliamentary. Executive power is vested in a prime minister elected by and responsible to the parliament. This ought to remain the form of government in a federal system, for three reasons. First, it conforms to the pre-1958 tradition in Iraq under British rule and the monarchy. Second, it would be difficult to elect an executive president acceptable to Shiites, Sunni Arabs and Kurds. Third, an executive president could more easily become a dictator than could a prime minister.

The current constitution mandates that members of parliament be elected from multimember districts by proportional representation. This should also continue in a federal system, perhaps with a threshold requirement for a party to acquire representatives in parliament. Legislators elected in this fashion would represent more diverse inter-

ests and make it more difficult for a sectarian Shiite majority to dominate the parliament. The counterargument that proportional representation could result in a weak and unstable government is not particularly strong, since the very purpose of an Iraqi federal government would be to limit central authority by restricting its powers.

A federation with minimal powers would not have a federal bill of rights guaranteeing individual rights against laws or actions by the regional governments. Such legislation would involve the federal government in the internal affairs of the regions and, in the fragile political environment in Iraq, invite armed conflict. Moreover, secular Iraqis and strict religious Muslims disagree about enforcing some elements of Islamic moral code. The federal government, of course, must enforce voting rights in federal elections, but the definition and enforcement of individual rights should otherwise be left to the regions to determine. However much libertarians may regret this, it is politically necessary in the present circumstances. It is worth remembering that the original U.S. Bill of Rights did not guarantee individual rights against laws or actions by state governments.

A Kurdish member of parliament, Adham Barzani, speaks about the draft Iraqi constitution in the Kurdish parliament in Arbil, north of Baghdad.

PHOTO CNS/REUTERS

For regional boundaries, a majority vote in each of the existing provinces could determine to which region each would belong, subject to any readjustments of the borders the regions may agree to bilaterally.

Baghdad would be a special case, because although the capital is within the Sunni Arab region and its population is predominately Sunni Arab, it also has a large Shiite population, and Shiite militias patrol a quarter of the city. Baghdad could be constituted as a federal district after the model of the District of Columbia in the United States, Ottawa in Canada or Canberra in Australia. The federal army would be responsible for Baghdad's overall security, and local elected officials would be responsible for ordinary municipal services. This would be a tough sell even to moderate regional Sunni Arabs, because the army would be dominated by Shiites; but the local administration would be dominated by Sunni Arabs, and Baghdad's Sunnis would elect most of its representatives to the federal parliament. It may be easier to sell this plan to moderate Shiites, because it would provide greater security to nonmilitant Shiites in Baghdad.

Sharing Oil Revenues

The allocation of revenue from royalties on exported oil remains a key matter of dispute between the regions established by the present Iraqi constitution. Both the Kurdish and Shiite regions have vast oil deposits, while the Sunni region has few known reserves. The Sunni Arabs want the nation to control oil production so that their region can share in the oil revenues. The Kurds and Shiites want unrestricted control over oil production in their respective regions, and many of them are unwilling to share oil revenues with the Sunni region, although they might be willing to allocate a portion of those revenues to the federal government. How much the Kurds and Shiites will actually concede to the nation is unclear, despite provisions in the existing constitution.

In a loose federal system, each region would control its own oil production and could extract royalties as it chose (and the market allowed) but could not favor its own regional customers. Regional royalties on exported oil would be over and above the royalties the federal government levied to support federal expenditures. An independent commission of experts representing the regions equally would be necessary to regulate limits on production to conserve resources and limit regional royalties to assure marketability. The Kurdish and Shiite regions would benefit from the royalties they received, and the Sunni Arab region would benefit from the common domestic oil market. If oil reserves should be discovered in the Sunni Arab region, the Kurdish and Shiite regions would then also benefit from them.

An Uncertain Future

There are only two alternatives to a federal system of government for Iraq: a unitary state or partition. A unitary state might have been possible if the post-Saddam occupation had been better planned, organized and executed. At this point, though, sectarian and regional rivalries have been unleashed, and the survival of a unitary state would require an active U.S. military presence for many years to come. It is doubtful that the American electorate would tolerate such a solution.

The Kurdish region of Iraq, which is already operating de facto as an autonomous entity, is relatively stable, despite

rival factions and a large minority of Arabs and other non-Kurds in areas such as Mosul and Kirkuk. In the Shiite region, minority populations are small and unlikely to incite civil strife. The Sunni Arab region, however, is currently beset by a number of insurgent groups, principally Baathists, members of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia and extremists intent on restoring Sunni dominance in a unitary Iraqi state. A federal system may make this situation even less stable in the short term, but the obstacles to stability under a federal system would be much the same as those now confronting the Iraqi government.

Samuel Johnson once remarked that the prospect of being hanged in a fortnight causes a man to concentrate powerfully. So, too, the prospect of the imminent departure of active U.S. forces from Iraq should encourage moderate Iraqis to replace their weak unitary state with a federal system of government.

If the current unitary state remains the prescribed form of government, a de facto partition will likely ensue when U.S. forces depart, a move that may be only a year or two away. Sunni Arab insurgents and militias on all sides would be emboldened, and the Iraqi army would have to confront the insurgents and militias alone. Army morale could collapse, leading to widespread disobedience and desertions. At that point, power would devolve from the national government to political leaders and militia forces in each region, followed by massive Shiite and Sunni population shifts, which are already under way in some areas. An intraregional conflict could escalate into an interregional war. Neighboring Syria and Iran would be tempted to intervene to aid Sunni Arabs and Shiites, respectively. Moreover, an Iranian alliance with the Shiites would threaten the security of moderate regimes in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon and the Persian Gulf emirates. It would also threaten the existence of Israel, especially if Iran develops a capacity for nuclear weapons and longer-range missile systems. The United States and other Western nations would need to act vigorously to prevent such a scenario, but having intervened once militarily and paid a heavy price, the United States would not likely do so again, despite the disastrous consequences of partition for the people of Iraq; nor would any other nation or coalition likely intervene.

Before American military withdrawal begins in the next few years, Iraq must face the political problem of how to establish a lasting governmental system that can hold the country together. The current model of a unitary state is no longer viable, because it lacks effective compromise on the distribution of executive power and the allocation of economic resources. In the current atmosphere of mutual distrust, federalism is the only alternative to partition for Iraq. Those responsible for the future of Iraq will, one hopes, perceive this and act accordingly. A

Artful Contemplation

Praying with art during Lent and Easter

BY KAREN SUE SMITH

FOR THE NEARLY TWO MILLENNIA since the faith emerged from the catacombs, Christians have employed art—and artists—to build churches, adorn them and inspire the faithful. As a result Christianity has made an enormous contribution to art. Church art in all its forms, from priests' vestments and altarpieces to statues, gargoyles, bas-reliefs and stained glass windows, also educated illiterate persons and young children in the faith. It still does.

During the Middle Ages church art provided most of the images an average European saw in a lifetime. It was virtually the only visual medium available to the masses—today's Internet, television, film and print media together in one venue. Even after the invention of the printing press, when Christians prayed with texts—psalms, parables and memorable passages from Scripture and other religious classics—they continued to use images in meditation and prayer. Private chapels in aristocratic homes contained at

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"DESCENT FROM THE CROSS," BY MARC CHAGALL

A Sampler of Art for Lent

The Art Institute of Chicago owns "The Crucifixion," by Lucas Cranach the Elder; "Study of Arms and Legs of Christ Crucified," a pen-and-ink study by Eugène Delacroix full of motion and life; "Christ on the Cross," a rubbing in native style by Paul Gauguin; "Christ Carrying the Cross," an unfamiliar oil worth seeing by a Bavarian master, from the Worcester Collection; and "Descent From the Cross," one of two by Rembrandt. However, only two images of the more than 100 I viewed online are currently on view in the museum: "Black Cross, New Mexico," Georgia O'Keeffe's stark, bodyless cross dominating a Southwest landscape; and "The Crucifixion," by Francisco de Zurbarán, a large painting against a dark background that many will find appealing for reflection. (www.artic.edu/aic)

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, contains a marble sculpture, "Christ at the Column"; "The Last Supper Frieze," from 12th-century Spain, a fresco transferred to canvas; Battista Tiepolo's etching "St. Joseph Carrying the Infant Jesus"; a small bronze plaque from 17th-century Italy of "The Flagellation"; and a stunning oil by Simone Cantarini, "The Risen Christ," in which Christ appears to fly over the bodies of sleeping soldiers. Unfortunately, many images in the collection are not yet online. (www.mfa.org)

The Getty Center, Los Angeles, has hundreds of prospects, among which are: Simon Bening's "The Agony in the Garden," a small painting with gold leaf on parchment, one of a number of paintings by him in this format, including "Denial of St. Peter," "Christ, Caiaphas," and other illustrations; a footlong corpus carved from wood in 1600, the kind of devotional object used for millennia; carved wooden panels by Christoph Daniel Schenck, including "The Penitent St. Peter," anguished at having betrayed Jesus; and a pen-and-ink finished drawing by Pellegrino Tibaldi, "The Incredulity of Thomas." (www.getty.edu/museum)

The High Museum of Art, Atlanta, has not put its permanent collection online for browsing; but the museum-selected highlights from its European art collection include "The Denial of St. Peter," by Nicolas Tournier, a large, dramatic and colorful depiction with six major figures, making Peter's denial all the more public. The folk art category features "Jesus on the Cross," a carved and painted crucifix by Ulysses Davis. (www.high.org)

least one art object, typically a painting or statue. Christians of means also bought small icons, portable enough to take with them and use regularly. When a literate middle class gradually developed, it adopted such devotions.

Today, some of the greatest Christian art remains in churches, mostly in Europe, but much has been acquired by museums around the world. Following the example of our ancestors in the faith, why not use the great treasury of Christian art as a source of prayer, meditation and devotion?

A friend who visited a state-owned art museum in Moscow not long ago was surprised to observe people kneeling, bowing their heads and praying reverently in public before the icons and other Christian works on display. Some worshipers left a flower or a candle on the floor beside a work. Apparently such gestures are commonplace. That these Christians had encountered the art outside a church seemed to matter not at all, since the art itself was seen in that culture and among the Orthodox as worthy of veneration.

Our culture, by contrast, tends to fragment experience, keeping each different type discretely in its place. As a result we may turn off religious sensibility in the workplace and in public, and turn it on at church or another explicitly religious event. Still, religious experience can break through to us in art.

Museum Insights

On first seeing Vincent van Gogh's paintings from Arles, an extensive collection exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum in New York many years ago, I was nearly overcome, responding viscerally, even physically, to the works. It was as though the artist had presented what a resurrected world would look like, and—this was my big insight on that occasion—it was our world. I rushed into a nearby church to sit in the silence and ponder what I had seen. Because of the huge crowds, it had not occurred to me at the time that I might pray at the museum.

On Good Friday several years ago, I toured the Met's European galleries looking at crucifixion scenes, purposely seeking an image to jolt me into comprehending the meaning of the day. Looking closely on scene after scene, gazing as a believer, not as an art critic or as an art student, provided a nourishing spiritual experience. Some of the rooms were empty and quiet. A few had seating, where I could be still and linger. To extend the time inconspicuously, I jotted my thoughts on a pad, a ruse as well as a tool, to help me focus at length on the one or two paintings that held me in thrall. Since then, I have planned similar visits, especially during Advent/Christmas, Lent and Easter, and recommend the practice to all. Underlying the practice is a belief that art can engage a viewer in a powerful, visual way, and thereby mediate God's spirit.

Most cities and large towns have an art museum, and most museums have at least one painting or sculpture suitable for Christian reflection. Someone in a remote area or housebound could look online or at printed art reproductions in books. The point is to observe a work of art closely, slowly, and to let it shape one's thoughts, senses and reflection.

Some may prefer to spend time before an image, focused and still at a museum, and then head to a nearby church for quiet prayer. To do so, however, incurs the risk of breaking concentration and losing the image and its gifts. One might also try the reverse: praying at home with a print or online image before going to a museum to see the original work. An original displays the actual canvas the artist used (size makes an impact, whether big or small); it reveals a painter's brush strokes (or a sculptor's chisel, rivet, weld or knot), the artist's signature, the ravages of time or the benefits of a recent restoration. It is the inimitable real thing, complete (sometimes) with mistakes.

"THE DEAD CHRIST AND THE ANGELS," BY EDOUARD MANET

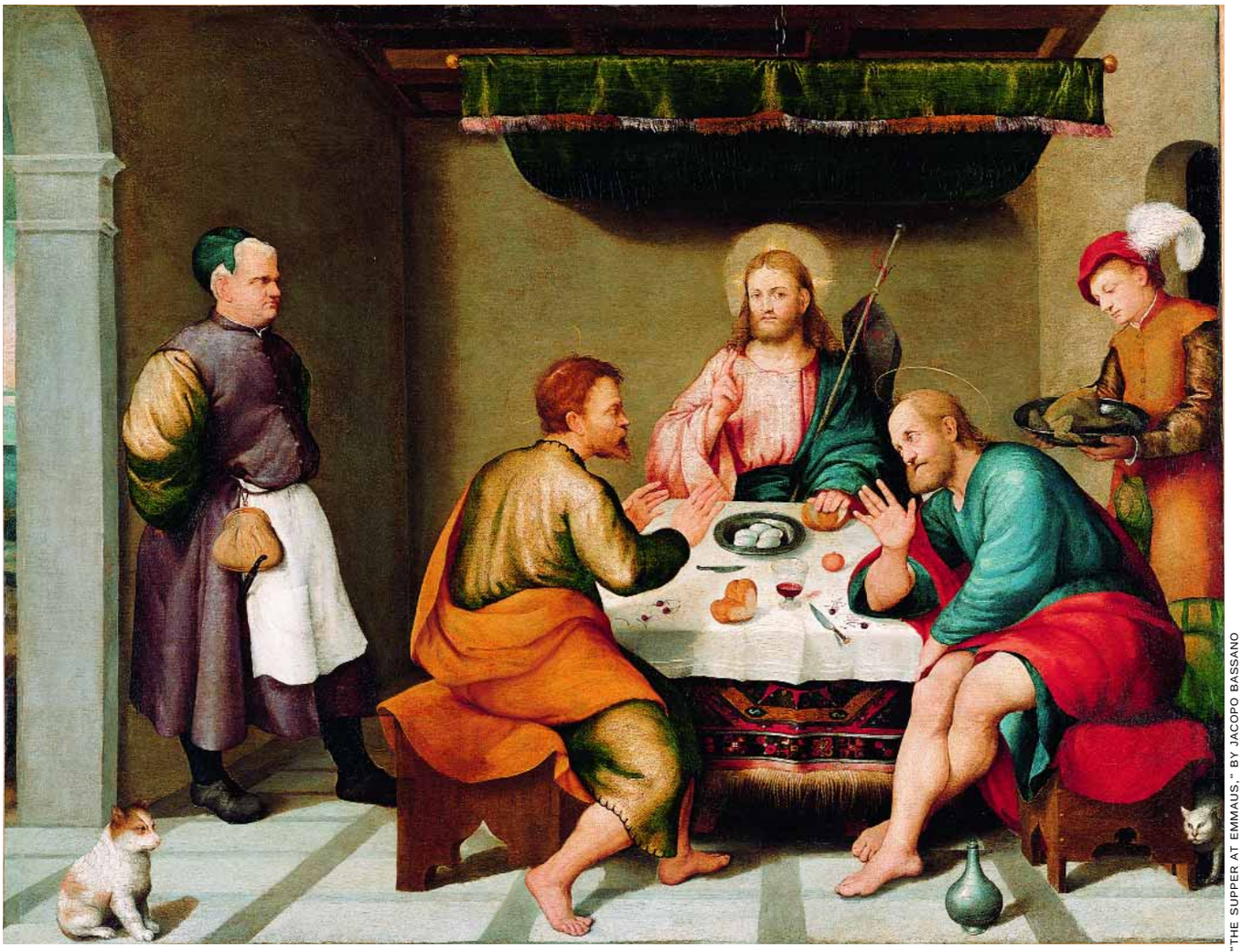
Selecting an Image

Since one does not stand before art as at a blank slate, one must begin where one is. I have walked through a gallery with Christ's passion seared into my mind, having just come from Mass or a prayer service steeped in music and homilies on social justice; I have found art showing Jesus' birth and boyhood to be newly profound, seen retrospectively from the vantage point of his death. Similarly, during Easter, aware that death has been defanged, images of a suffering Jesus—betrayed, scourged, nailed down, jeered at—may appear illuminated, tinted with abiding joy. Most people, however, will likely find scenes from Jesus' life leading up to and including the crucifixion to be the most potent ones for Lenten reflection.

Choosing an image for reflection is highly personal and depends on a viewer's taste and understanding of art. Not everyone will gravitate toward overtly religious subjects, but most people will. Even then, the subject range may be enormous. Classical works from the Middle Ages and Renaissance are abundant, and some museums will have roomfuls of European paintings where one can look. Some viewers may prefer 19th-century works, like those by Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Georges Rouault, Henry Ossawa Tanner and Thomas Eakins, an American painter who painted a life-sized, realistic crucifix. For 20th-century works, consider Emil Nolde, Salvador Dali or Marc Chagall, who, though a Jewish artist, painted several sensitive images of the crucifixion (see p. 15). (For a surprising image, take a look at "The Resurrection, Cookham" by Sir Stanley Spencer, who customarily used his family members and neighbors as models; this image, unlike many of the others I am recommending, which are in the United States, makes its home at the Tate Gallery in London.) Less overtly religious and Christian are works by Paul Klee and Marc Rothko.

To prevent being overwhelmed by the wealth of images a large museum may offer, consider browsing online through the permanent collection to find an image of interest, then head straight to the museum to find it. Or if frequenting a museum is easy, why not visit the appropriate collections to see which works woo you back for more?

Not everyone is drawn to intentionally religious subject matter, even as an aid to prayer. Some prefer art that is



"THE SUPPER AT EMMAUS," BY JACOPO BASSANO

evocative, perhaps photographs of people and places, landscapes or abstractions. Matisse's dancing shapes can evince joy and life unconstrained by death as much as any scene of the victorious Jesus standing before or on an empty tomb. So could some works by Jackson Pollock. Sculpture that soars or beckons, abstractions that raise one's sights and lower one's guard, color combinations that call one into the deep—these are all worthy of contemplation. Some people may wish to seek out a favorite artist: Raphael, Caravaggio, Tissot, El Greco, Rembrandt.

As a test, I looked online through the small permanent collection of the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Tex. It contains a number of candidates for spiritual reflection, including "Raising of Lazarus" (by Duccio di Buoninsegna), a delightful Sienese tempera on wood; "Christ Blessing" (by Giovanni Bellini); and an indoor "Supper at Emmaus" (by Jacopo Bassano, reproduced above), which includes two servants who witness the scene. The Kimbell also owns many paintings of the Madonna with child, and at least one of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt; these would be appropriate for reflection any time of year, since Christians celebrate the whole Christ event—birth to resurrection—in every season.

Three From the Metropolitan

Since so many people either live in or visit New York City, or can at least view the holdings of the Metropolitan Museum of Art online, I have selected three images from hundreds available at that museum to illustrate briefly the kind of observations that can lead to prayer. (See the sidebar for a listing of suitable artworks elsewhere.)

"The Denial of Saint Peter," by Caravaggio (Gallery 30). The artist depicts three characters—a maid, a soldier and the terrified fisherman, Peter, who has followed Jesus closely up to this portentous moment. The viewer glimpses a private drama, as the maid publicly accuses Peter, who is still overwhelmed by fear. He was there in the Garden of Gethsemane when Judas betrayed Jesus to the authorities, and he knows that Jesus stands above him now, being interrogated by the high priest. Peter's thumbs point to his own breast as if accusing himself, despite the words of denial on his lips, "I never knew the man." To a Christian, this painting shows how costly discipleship can be. Peter understands

that his faith is a life or death matter. "I thought I killed Jesus," Msgr. Philip Murnion once wrote about the sinner's personal responsibility for the crucifixion. What would I do in Peter's place?

"Crucifixion," by Salvador Dali (first-floor entryway to the modern galleries). In surrealist style, the artist suspends Jesus' body in midair, "lifts it up," to use biblical phrasing, like the snake lifted up to heal the unfaithful Israelites in Moses' day and as God will do once and for all at the resurrection. In Dali's painting, Jesus is invisibly attached to a cross, made of bronze cubes. We see no blood, no nails and no facial expression at all, yet Jesus' fingers curl in agony. Beneath him, a woman dressed in a long robe gazes up. Both faces are turned away from the viewer. The woman stands on a tile floor that leads to a beach, water and mountains. She witnesses the crucifixion, as does the viewer, who also witnesses her presence there. On one level, this is a traditional theme: a woman at the foot of the cross. Here, though, we are asked to decide who we are in relation to this Jesus: Are we merely an onlooker or something more, a follower, a witness too? What do we make of this man's death? Can it heal us?

"Dead Christ With Angels" by Edouard Manet (new Impressionist galleries, reproduced on p. 17). Manet chooses as a subject a moment between the crucifixion and the resurrection; we are party to that moment of cosmic sorrow. Perhaps these two angels are the ones who will speak to Mary Magdalen when she comes to the tomb. The artist presents an ashen-faced corpse with clear wounds. Jesus is expressionless; all the emotion appears on the faces of the angels. The artist's intention seems captured in the title, to show us the Christ not quite risen. The snake slithering in the foreground, symbol of the Satan, is about to be conquered as soon as God raises Jesus from this state and fills him with new life. The painting caused outrage when it was first displayed, because the subject seemed unseemly and it contains an erroneous biblical quotation, which the artist refused to correct even after it was pointed out to him.

Finding the right image to contemplate is like choosing a book to read. Before investing time and money, many people consult book reviews, ask friends for suggestions, read a sample chapter online or in the stacks, then make a choice.

Once the selection is made, one need not research the picture or the artist, though that does not hurt appreciation. Instead, the goal is to connect with the image by simply looking, waiting patiently until links are established. To attend to art in prayer, one must believe that artists, at least the great ones, communicate some truth about creation or the human condition. Art can draw one out of oneself and into a liminal state of openness and responsiveness to God's spirit. That is something I have experienced, and the hope of finding it again compels me to search out art in books, in churches, online and in museums.

Images send subliminal messages, as advertisers well know. Why not make time to look contemplatively at images that matter, take them in, let them have their way with us, so to speak. Like music keenly heard, art can also usher us into a spiritual realm where we can see the presence of God. It is right here in our midst. A

Page 15: Marc Chagall (1887-1985) © ARS, N.Y. "Descent From the Cross," 1968-76. Private collection. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.

Page 17: Edouard Manet, "The Dead Christ and the Angels," 1864, oil on canvas, 70 5/8 x 59 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, H. O. Havermeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havermeyer, 1929.

Page 18: Jacopo Bassano (Jacopo dal Ponte), "The Supper at Emmaus," c. 1538, oil on canvas, 39 5/8 x 50 5/8 in., Kimbell Art Museum. Acquired with the generous assistance of a gift from Mildred Sterling Hedrick.

An audio-visual meditation on how to pray with art, at americamagazine.org.

The Joy of Transformation

Rediscovering the sacrament of reconciliation

BY GREG KANDRA

"BLESS ME, Father, for I have sinned."

I spoke the words clearly, firmly, just as I had been taught by Sister St. Margaret. This wasn't my first confession, but it was close to it. And on this particular Saturday afternoon, my mother had decided to take me to confession for reasons I can't remember; but since I was a 7-year-old with a cranky temper and a disobedient streak, I'm sure they were valid.

Now here I was alone in the dark, whispering my sins. I was kneeling on a piece of cracked vinyl padding, speaking into a frayed scrap of velvet cloth that covered a metal grate. Behind that cloth sat a stranger, a priest with his ear bent and his shadowy head nodding. I smelled mothballs and after-shave and something like cigarettes. Or was it incense?

I told him my sins, and he gave me my penance. And in just a few moments, it was over. I prayed the act of contrition—"O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee..."—then crossed myself, pulled aside the heavy curtain and went to the altar rail, knelt and prayed. I had done it. The secrets in my heart had been shared with another and God, in his mercy, had forgiven me. I was a new man! (O.K., a new 7-year-old.) The slate was clean. I could begin again.

After finishing the prayers I had been given, I returned to my mother's pew and we went out into the parking lot. As she started the station wagon and backed out of her space, she had a word of advice. "Gregory," she said, "you've got to learn to keep your voice down. I could hear you all over the church."

My ears turned crimson. And early on, before I had barely gotten my feet wet in the sacrament of confession, I wanted to shake them dry and have nothing to do with it again. Ever.

Years Adrift

My early experience with confession may be one reason why for many years I avoided it, as a man with a cavity avoids the dentist. I was afraid it would hurt. Even when "confession" underwent a makeover and became "reconciliation," and the small dark boxes were replaced with wide-open rooms, I was reluctant. I would go once or twice a year—a perfunctory, had-to-do-it practice. My heart wasn't in it. My head, certainly, was elsewhere.

In the interim, when I did go, there may have been flashes of forgiveness, moments of grace. If so, they were accidental. I didn't do much to help matters. Neither, for that matter, did some priests.

I remember once, in college, going to confession to talk over a family problem. It was a Saturday afternoon, just before the 5 p.m. Mass. The priest, fully vested for Mass, was standing outside the confessional, hands clasped behind his back. He looked like a barber waiting for his next customer. People were arriving for Mass, taking their pews. Nobody else was there for confession, so I approached the priest.

"You open for business?" I asked. He said sure, and ushered me into the confessional—actually more like a small office, complete with a desk and two chairs. I sat down, took a deep breath and told him my troubles and why I felt I needed forgiveness. He nodded sympathetically and said he thought he might be able to help. Then he opened a desk drawer and pulled out a pamphlet, offered it to me, and smiled. It

ART BY STEFANIE AUGUSTINE

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was a brochure about communication.

I wasn't sure what to say, but thanked him. He patted my shoulder and said he would pray for me. With that, he stood up to point me back into the church. He had to begin Mass. I didn't pray the act of contrition. I don't think he gave me absolution. He told me to have a nice day.

I didn't. Somehow, I left the confessional feeling worse than when I went in.

I remained skeptical of the sacrament for years after that. I drifted away from regular Mass attendance, and went for years without darkening the door of a reconciliation room or slipping behind the velvet curtain of a confessional. What was the point? In my mind, I was right with God: He knew where I was coming from (and, no doubt, where I was going) and I apologized to him, privately, when it seemed like the right thing to do. End of discussion.

But no.

Returning Home

Years later, the twisting road of my life led me back to the church and the sacraments, and it plunged me more deeply into my faith than I had ever imagined possible. There were many reasons for my return: the deaths of my parents, the prayers of my wife and a growing sense that there had to be more to life than just getting up and going to work and planning where to go out for dinner or when to take the next cruise. I became a daily communicant. I served in my parish as an usher and, later, as an extraordinary minister of Communion.

And as part of my journey, when the time became right and my heart became ready, I found myself on yet another Saturday in yet another church, preparing to catalogue my sins yet again.

I was going to give confession another chance.

I had wandered into the basement chapel of St. Francis of Assisi in Manhattan, a place whose lifeblood is the endless stream of commuters from Penn Station and the Long Island Railroad, who find their way there for confession at all hours of the day. There is always a line. As I soon discovered, it is easy to understand why.

After entering the small confessional/reconciliation room and closing the door, I found myself seated opposite a kindly old friar wearing the familiar brown

robe and, oddly enough, sneakers. I cleared my throat and began: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been (quick tally in my mind) 10 years since my last confession."

He broke into a small smile. "Welcome back," he said. "It's good to see you again." He had never seen me before in my life. But I knew what he meant.

And with that, I began my confession. I spoke. He listened. He nodded. He had heard it all before, umpteen times, from the quivering lips of countless sinners like me. When it was over he gave me a mild penance and some gentle advice: "Just live the Gospel," he said softly. "Just live the Gospel." He sighed and smiled. "There you are. Good as new. God bless you."

It was the first time in a long time that those words stuck. And when I left that little room I felt, in fact, "good as new." So I went back a few weeks later, and a few weeks after that—again and again and again. It became a habit.

Uplifted and Given Grace

I can't quite explain it. Why does this sacrament exert such force? Some of it, I'm sure, is that it just feels good to let the weight of all our wrongs roll off our shoulders. It is comforting to be told that we are going to be okay and that what was wrong can be set right.

Everybody needs a second chance. Or a third.

Of course, it isn't easy. It requires reflection, observation, scrutiny. For a few moments we are asked to be moral anthropologists. We seek out our sins. We capture them, name them, tag them and put them under glass to study, like wildly exotic fauna. What on earth *is* that?

The Chinese have a saying: "The beginning of wisdom is to call something by its correct name." Perhaps that is part of it, too: we name what we are—proud, greedy, lustful, petty, selfish, untruthful—and become aware. With penance and practice, we strive to be better. Wisdom begins.

Or so we hope. And so we pray: "I firmly resolve with the help of thy grace to confess my sins, to do penance, and to amend my life, Amen."

Those final words of the Act of Contrition put it so succinctly and clearly. The purpose of the sacrament, really, is to amend life. To improve on what is there.

And with that improvement, I think, comes this beautiful promise at the heart of our faith: the promise that we will rise. We can be uplifted. Resurrection is available. All of us can roll aside the stone of our personal tomb and stagger, blinking, into the sun. As more than a few preachers have proclaimed: the paschal mystery didn't end on Good Friday but on Easter Sunday.

So it can be with each of us, too.

The profound act of being reconciled with God enables us to live Easter every time we emerge from that confessional. We breathe again. We see light again. We hope again. We are given grace.

At bottom, what begins with seven short words—"Bless me, father, for I have sinned"—ends in transformation. It may last only an hour or a day. But the fact that it happens at all is miraculous. And that gives me reason enough to keep going back. A

From the archives, William J. O'Malley, S.J., on "Understanding Reconciliation," at americamagazine.org.

A Compelling Intellectual Coterie

American Transcendentalism

A History

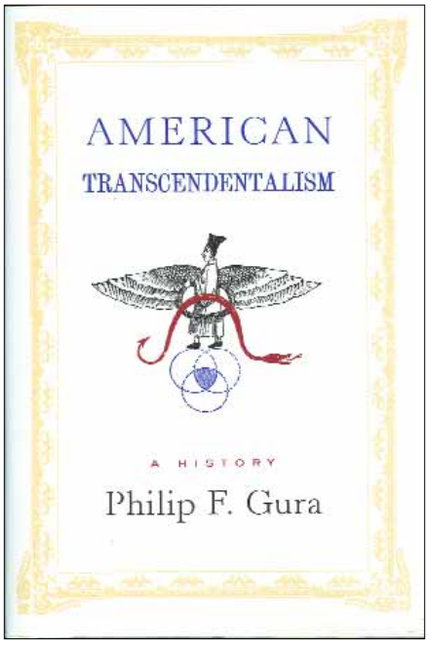
By Philip F. Gura

Hill & Wang. 384p $27.50
ISBN 9780809034772

Philip F. Gura is one of America's leading historians, a prolific scholar who has dealt with a wide variety of subjects, from the twang of banjos to the angry God of Jonathan Edwards. His research and writing on the American Transcendentalists—a "club of the like-minded," as one of them put it, that included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau—spans over two decades. If such writers and their ideas are to be trusted to the hands of the historian, surely Professor Gura would be that historian.

The potential problem, however, as Gura acknowledges at the outset, is that Transcendentalism, one of our nation's most influential, most notoriously diffuse and least understood intellectual movements, resists the positive identification and earnest categorization on which much historical research rests. An epigraph at the very beginning of the book (taken from Orestes Brownson, an important participant in Transcendentalism who later became a Catholic) suggests that historians will have their hands full with the Transcendentalists: "No single term can describe them. Nothing can be more unjust to them, or more likely to mislead the public, than to lump them all together...." Because it comprised diverse interests and manifested itself in myriad ways, American Transcendentalism has been defined variously as a philosophy, a religion, a politics and a type of literature. The differences among practitioners, the several "varieties of Transcendentalism," the equally diverse character of its influences on American culture and the fact that scholars do not agree on the extent of the movement's duration—all these traits make it a squirmy subject when asked to pose for a portrait.

One of the dangers of the historical treatment of a vital, definition-resistant, multiform intellectual movement that unfolds over time is that such a history might result in a mere butterfly collection or museum exhibit. If the historian removes the object of study from nature, if the object is dried out and preserved for the sake of academic study, we consequently may be afforded a stable perspective from which to view the now-stationary object—but the object is dead, a mere lifeless curiosity.



American Transcendentalism: A History tries very hard not to kill the movement under study. From its introduction on "Locating the Like-Minded," the book acknowledges the nebulous shape of Transcendentalism, maintains a diversity of opinion at the core of the movement and proceeds to define its subject without desiccating it.

Although Gura—who teaches American literature and culture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—provides necessary facts and helpful dates, he does so without resorting to static definitions or hasty lumping. His approach thus resembles and is in sympathy with a church scholar whom he discusses early in the book. Like James Murdock before him, Gura aims to apply thoroughness and lucidity to "so potentially abstruse a topic." He puts faces to names, familiar and not, and frequently brings his subjects to life for readers.

To offer just one example, Gura vividly depicts the imposing figure of Brownson, whose only vices were "being cantankerous" and "chewing tobacco" and whose efforts to bring the spiritual and the material together were as tireless as his labors on behalf of the poor. The narrative of Brownson's dramatic transition from serving as a "de facto field general" of emergent Transcendentalism to becoming one of the "chief intellectual voices" of the Catholic Church in America typifies Gura's engaging style.

Many Transcendentalists parade before us, advocating "new views," self-reliance, the abolition of slavery, "the import of the natural world," women's rights and protesting "politicians' blatant instigation of armed conflict for their own self-serving ends." Religious seekers, ardent intellectuals and forthright rebels are brought together with their precursors, followers and critics. The kooky and charismatic, their insights and outrage, their disputes and factions people Gura's comprehensive history.

Even so, the book is not without its shortcomings. On several occasions, the author shows a tendency to follow some lines of inquiry a step too far. When discussing the rise of Idealism and the importance of the Higher Criticism of the Bible to developing Transcendentalism, for instance, he seems to get a bit lost in Germany. And while the context provided for Transcendentalist works is among the best we have been given, the author's reading of particular texts (especially Emerson's) will sometimes smother the spark that is used for kindling. Still, the prose—though a bit plodding at times—is generally lively, clear, readable and often inspired.

The Reviewers

T. S. McMillin is chair of the English department at Oberlin College, in Ohio.

Maureen Sullivan, O.P., is associate professor of theology at St. Anselm College, Manchester, N.H.

Olga Bonfiglio is a professor at Kalamazoo College and the author of *Heroes of a Different Stripe: How One Town Responded to the War in Iraq.*

At its best, *American Transcendentalism* captures some of the fervor of the thinkers, their eclectic use of resources and the extent to which those resources may truly be said to have inspired an intellectual and spiritual revolution. During these moments, American Transcendentalism shakes off the dust of history and becomes a living, breathing movement; and the reader becomes aware of possible connections between then and now—is invited, so to speak, into "The New Club of the Like-Minded." It is precisely connections that made Transcendentalism radically significant, and perhaps make it still significant. By connecting religion, nature, spirit, social justice, philosophy, poetry, writing and reading, movement and vision, belonging or partaking and observing or seeing, Transcendentalists preached the need for being "unsettled," as Emerson reminded readers in his essay "Circles." The writers and their writings can yet unsettle those attracted to Transcendentalist questions.

If the reader is not already drawn to think about American Transcendentalism, this study may not be of interest. But the reader who is so drawn, or drawn to American intellectual and/or religious history, will be amply rewarded.

T. S. McMillin

The Challenge of Change

Vatican II

Did Anything Happen?

By John W. O'Malley, Joseph A. Komonchak, Stephen Schloesser, Neil J. Ormerod

Edited by David G. Schultenover, S.J.

Continuum. 185p $16.95 (paperback)
ISBN 9780826428905

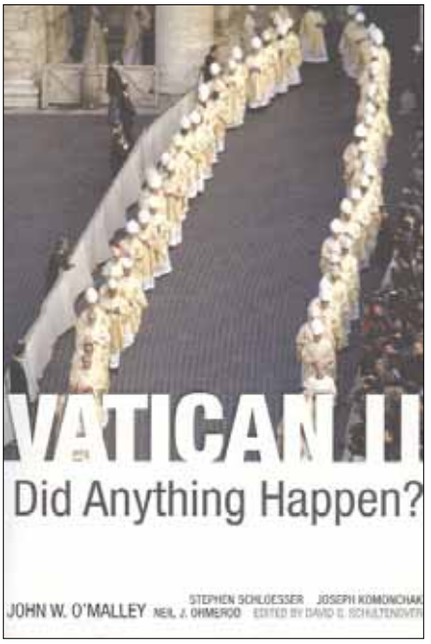
After the Second Vatican Council, Yves Congar was concerned that we might become complacent in our theological endeavors, thinking that the texts of the council would be viewed as fixing once and for all the aims of the *aggiornamento* called for by Pope John XXIII. In this regard, Congar would have welcomed the four essays contained in this book.

The church historian John W. O'Malley tells us in the introduction to *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* that its essays deal with basic interpretative questions: "Did anything of significance happen at the council? If so, what? So what? And, what methods will help answer these questions?" He then points to a second and more specific issue addressed by each of the essays: "How continuous or discontinuous was Vatican II with previous councils, with previous teachings and practices?" This proves to be a critical question for each author, because there exists today a strong current in the church that insists on the council's absolute continuity with the Catholic past. Each of the book's four contributors takes on this interpretation and challenges it. In addition to preparing the readers for the essays that follow, O'Malley also provides excellent theological/historical background on Vatican II that opens the door for a wider readership.

In "Vatican II as an 'Event,'" Joseph A. Komonchak, who teaches at The Catholic University of America, focuses on three terms that help to explain what we mean by Vatican II: event, experience and final documents. The term "event," which is treated in depth, is understood as a "noteworthy occurrence, one that has consequences." Komonchak provides examples of such consequences as well as ample evidence why Vatican II has come to be perceived as an event in this sense. Yet, as he points out, opinions are not unanimous in this regard. Three kinds of interpretation of the council can be found in contemporary evaluations of Vatican II, with only two of them agreeing that it was an event, a departure of some sort from the past. Both the progressives and the traditionalists agree—for different reasons—that the council was indeed an event, a turning point in Catholic history. The third interpretation, the reformist view, resists accepting the eventful character of the council as a break with the tradition. In his discussion of the council as event, Komonchak views Vatican II as an episode in a larger story—one that does not end with its closing in 1965 but is still being played out in our own time.

The starting point for John O'Malley's article, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" was the challenge

recently issued by Cardinal Camillo Ruini regarding the use of the term "event" as a way of describing Vatican II. O'Malley's response looks at the literary genre of the documents. He claims that attention to this demonstrates the special character and the significant turn promoted at Vatican II, a turn that resulted in a new



model of the church and of its style for carrying out its mission to the world.

O'Malley maintains that something significant did happen at Vatican II and offers the reader some of the extraordinary ways the council was "discontinuous" with the 20 councils that preceded it. He notes that change happens even in the church. To maintain otherwise is to claim that the history of the church makes no sense and has no relevance. The whole issue of development of doctrine was central to the Second Vatican Council. And, as O'Malley points out, "development is a soft word for change. It presumes continuity. It also presumes discontinuity."

This article makes a significant contribution to the ongoing interpretation of the texts of Vatican II. O'Malley compares the traditional literary genres of church documents with the texts of Vatican II and finds a new style of discourse in the council's documents. He refers to this as the "epideictic" genre, which contains the "art of persuasion and thus reconciliation." This is a significant departure from previous practice. O'Malley believes this is the

style that Pope John XXIII appeared to embrace in his opening speech at Vatican II, when he claimed that the church should act by "making use of the medicine of mercy rather than severity." This new style of discourse carries serious implications and ramifications for understanding Vatican II in our time. (In this regard, readers can look forward to O'Malley's new book, *What Happened at Vatican II*, due out this summer.)

In "Against Forgetting: Memory, History, Vatican II," Stephen Schloesser—an associate professor of history at Boston College—agrees with O'Malley's claim that the council did intend to be an important turn in the road for Catholicism and, given other historical concerns at the time—the Holocaust, Communism and the cold war—he claims Vatican II was a moral necessity, because we were living in a time "when the world faced its deepest anxieties and had no idea whether or not they would soon be realized."

Schloesser provides the reader with a unique lens through which to continue the process of interpreting Vatican II. In O'Malley's article, a new focus appeared—from "what" to "how." Schloesser brings up another—a shift from "how" to "why." Given the fragmented world of the middle of the 20th century, the inhumanity that was witnessed on so many fronts, Schloesser maintains that "the council's rupture with the past appears not only as a historical possibility. It seems to have been an ethical necessity." Schloesser succeeds in demonstrating that the kinds of questions facing humanity at the time "required a genre that was proportionate to their scope: the epideictic oration."

The final article, "The Times They Are A-Changin'," by Neil Ormerod, offers a response to both O'Malley and Schloesser. Ormerod, a professor of theology at Australian Catholic University, Strathfield, N.S.W., acknowledges the church's longstanding "anxiety about change" and begins with an investigation into the question of change in the church. To understand the kind of change brought about by Vatican II, he maintains it is necessary to understand the historical and sociological context prior to the council. This context involves a shift from a classical world view to a historically conscious world view.

He underlines one serious implication of the previous mindset—that it prevents the church from realizing its true mission to the world. He then demonstrates how the historically conscious language of the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" served as a corrective. Ormerod argues that the church must change to fulfill its mission in a changing world, and he believes that in the last four decades, this process of change has not been handled well. Opening the door for change in the church raised many questions regarding the limits and possibilities of change.

In the encyclical *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Pope John Paul II held that the central task of the church in the new millennium would be to work toward an authentic assimilation of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. What we have in this brilliant and much-needed book are four superb thinkers who are doing just that. ***Maureen Sullivan***

'Oedipus Tex'

The Fall of the House of Bush

The Untold Story of How a Band of True Believers Seized the Executive Branch, Started the Iraq War, and Still Imperils America's Future

By Craig Unger

Scribner. 448p $27
ISBN 9780743280754

Although most Americans regard Sept. 11, 2001, as a day that changed the world, the investigative reporter Craig Unger would argue that the presidential election in 2000 served as a point of convergence for certain groups of people who helped create what he calls "the greatest foreign policy disaster in American history—one that could result in the end of American global supremacy."

In *The Fall of the House of Bush*, an eloquent and fascinating study of neoconservatives and Christian fundamentalists and their presidential candidate, George W. Bush, Unger traces their influential role in the administration's policymaking in the Middle East.

Many of today's neoconservatives were originally New Left intellectuals who came out of the antiwar movement and 1960s counterculture as angry individuals who either felt rebuffed socially or professionally and/or were attracted to the hawkish anti-Communist dogma of Democratic Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson.

In order to start something new, they imitated the influential left-wing Brookings Institution by organizing think tanks and lobbying groups, developing a fundraising apparatus and recruiting "scholars" and "experts" for the purpose of "overturn[ing] the present power structure of the country," as Paul Weyrich, founder of the neoconservative Heritage Foundation, asserted.

Meanwhile, both Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld racked up White House experience beginning with the Nixon administration, where they learned how to navigate government bureaucracy and position themselves for leadership.

In the early 1990s, at the conclusion of the cold war, the United States found itself the only remaining superpower. The neocons formulated a vision of a new American empire that would assert U.S. domination in the Middle East in order to control energy resources (like oil and gas), open up corporate-friendly markets, set up strategic military bases and protect Israel. They achieved a platform for their views by writing op-ed pieces and serving as spokespersons for opposing viewpoints in media interviews in the "liberal press" (i.e., network news, The New York Times and The Washington Post).

However, the neocons could not find a president who would adopt their platform. George H. W. Bush, a political realist, aimed to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through diplomacy, and Clinton did the same. It wasn't until the 2000 election that they found a candidate who might be more in tune with their agenda.

The 1960s also deeply affected the fundamentalist Christians, who saw modern humanist culture as a scourge on the nation. The public perceived them, however, as clueless rubes and fools. Only half of them even bothered to vote. The Supreme Court's ruling on school prayer and desegregation especially provoked them; but it was the legalization of abortion in 1973 that finally galvanized them to action.

Led by the evangelists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, they sought political

influence and found some support with Ronald Reagan. It was not until George W. Bush became president in 2000, however, that they gained a foothold not only in government policymaking and political appointments but in the Oval Office itself, according to Unger.

One of their particular issues of concern was Israel. At the bottom of this tinderbox were the 4,000-year-old biblical accounts of Abraham and his claim on the land of Israel. Also at issue were such topics as human existence, salvation and redemption, the End of Days and Armageddon. As a result, fundamentalist Christians had come to support the right-wing Israelis, because they believed that the Zionists' re-establishment of Israel signaled the Last Days.

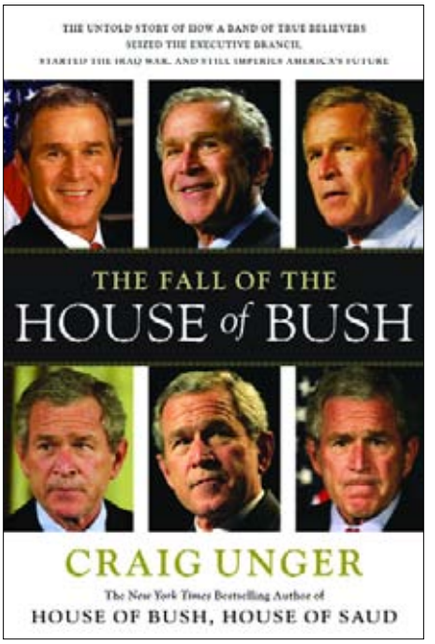
By the 2000 election, especially after the scandals of the Clinton administration, the fundamentalists were anxious to find a candidate of sound moral character who would promote their issues and concerns. George W. Bush, who was himself a born-again Christian, looked like a good prospect.

The neoconservatives recognized that the fundamentalist Christians could be used to support their own aims in the Middle East, so—Unger notes—they struck an alliance with them on their presidential candidate.

Before George W. Bush entered the national stage, he gave up drinking, found the Lord and became more serious about politics. He greatly helped his father's presidential campaigns by appealing to the same fundamentalist Christians who would later help him in his own presidential campaign. First, however, he had to prove that he deserved to be the favored son. He did that in 1994 by winning the governorship of Texas by a wide margin while his brother, Jeb, won the Florida governorship by a slim margin.

According to Unger, the tense father-son relationship stemmed from George W.'s inability to live up to the reputation and accomplishments of his father, as illustrated in the book's first chapter, "Oedipus Tex." Such family dramas are common. This one would be played out on the world stage.

Bush deliberately did the opposite of what his political realist father would do, says Unger, and he rejected most of his father's advisers. He did, however, accept Colin Powell as secretary of state, but only to trot out his good name for the 2000 and 2004 elections. Bush rarely consulted Powell. And he had him



dumped in 2005, even after Powell's February 2003 United Nations speech helped sell the war against Iraq.

On Sept. 11, 2001, the stars seemed to align themselves in an extraordinary way. Bush got his wish to be the commander-in-chief he had envisioned the president to be; the neoconservatives found the cataclysmic event that could kick off their quest to remake the Middle East; and fundamentalist Christians could get on with realizing their apocalyptic visions of Armageddon and the Second Coming of Christ.

Not everything, however, was exactly copacetic.

Bush's competence as a leader was questionable, especially in foreign affairs. As vice president, the ever-able Dick Cheney took charge of operations; he not only advised Bush but directed the president in foreign policy outright.

Cheney served as the "sole framer of key issues for Bush," notes Unger. He likewise ignored all interagency systems and functions and stuck to the neoconservatives' playbook for empire-building. As a result, Cheney got Bush to commit this country to two wars in the Middle East while he threatens a third with Iran.

The Fall of the House of Bush reads like a Shakespearean tragedy. Readers know what is going to happen next. What Unger does, however, is reveal how things happened. The cast of characters is large—and seen on TV nearly every day as Bush administration representatives. Extremely well written, Unger's book is an intriguing eye-opener to how the shadow government of Vice President Cheney and the neocons operates, what motivates it and how our democracy is threatened as a result.

Olga Bonfiglio

Classifieds

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Letters

Messy but Responsible

Gerald F. Powers makes a strong argument in "Our Moral Duty in Iraq" (2/18) in defense of the "responsible transition" position of the U.S. bishops toward withdrawal from Iraq, though the exit end of the transition process gets lost along the way. His article argues that in the absence of a legitimate and effective government in Iraq the United States can and should assume responsibility for "the interests of the people of Iraq." As an occupying power unable to facilitate legitimate and effective self-government in Iraq, the United States cannot exercise its continuing responsibilities unilaterally but only by turning responsibility over to others who might have a better claim on the trust of the people of Iraq.

Powers is correct to place the "withdrawal" question in the context of broader national and global policy objectives. Stability and security in the region and collaborative actions to stem terrorism require multinational cooperation, which is regularly set back by our chronic unilateralism and militarism. And the "exit now" position is not so easily dismissed. It is morally wrong to send our people to kill and die for political objectives that have no reasonable prospect of success, and our moral responsibility for the well-being of the people of Iraq includes not killing them, not facilitating segregation and civil violence and not making them vulnerable to armed thugs. If we cannot carry out our most basic responsibility to protect life, we need to withdraw and ask others to come to the assistance of the people of Iraq. Why did our bishops not say that, when a messy but responsible transition was recommended by the bipartisan Iraq Study Group?

David O'Brien
Worcester, Mass.

Exit Strategies

In "Our Moral Duty in Iraq" (2/18), Gerald F. Powers correctly invokes the "jus post bellum" principle that a nation that attacks another unjustly has a duty of restitution to the nation that had been wronged. Hence, the United States has a duty to the Iraqi people and to the nation's infrastructure to repair the damage that was done in this manifestly unjust war. I wish he specified who in the antiwar movement disagrees with this position, since I don't know of any peace group that wants to withdraw but not repair. He seems to think that those who want the United States to withdraw as soon as possible do not care what happens to the Iraqi people. Clearly, Mr. Powers does not want the United States to withdraw from Iraq until it has fulfilled its nation-building mission or some variation thereof.

Only the Iraqi people, however, can fix what we have broken. We can and should assist them through war reparations, but they should do the fixing. It is morally responsible, therefore, to hold that the United States should withdraw immediately and at the same time contribute to a U.N.-sponsored multinational relief effort that will enable the Iraqis—free of U.S. troops—to pursue their own destiny. Mr. Powers is correct to assert that the key moral question now is "what policies and strategies best serve the interests of the Iraqi people?" The best thing the United States can do for Iraq is to withdraw its troops and then work with international agencies to restore justice to the Iraqis. And we can beg the forgiveness of the Iraqi people as well; repentance should accompany restitution.

Joseph J. Fahey
White Plains, N.Y.

Historical Precedents

As a member of the medical ethics committee at a local community hospital for over 10 years, I read with interest the articles "At the End of Life," by Thomas A. Shannon (2/18), and "Church Teaching and My Father's Choice," by John J. Hardt (1/21). I would concur with the overall tone and conclusions or implications of both articles. I suspect that the average Catholic in the pew will respond to the church's new opinion on this topic relating to artificial nutrition and hydration much as he or she has responded to the church concerning artificial birth control. By and large, both opinions will continue to be mostly ignored.

Michael J. Weaver, M.D.
Elkhorn, Neb.

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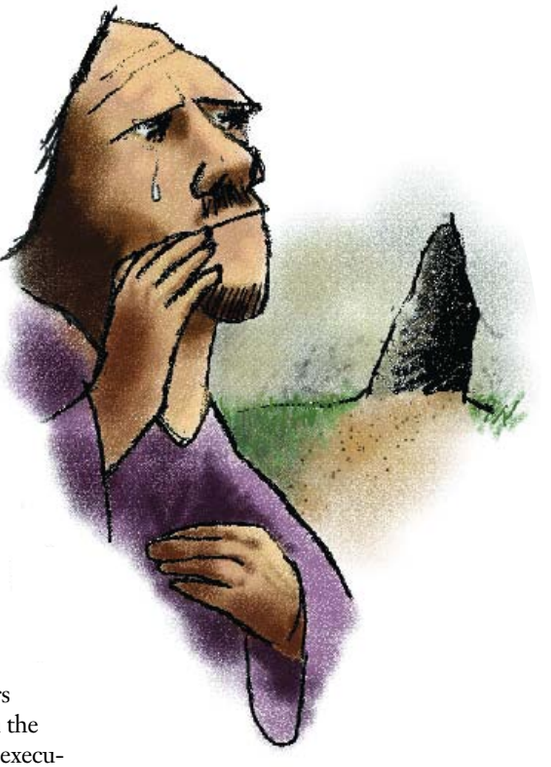
The Greatest Sign

Fifth Sunday of Lent (A), March 9, 2008

Readings: Ez 37:12-14; Ps 130:1-8; Rom 8:8-11; Jn 11:1-45

"I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11:25)



ART BY TAD DUNNE

THE BIBLE'S GREATEST and most powerful image of hope is that of resurrection. Resurrection hope is the theme of the Scripture readings for the fifth Sunday of Lent. For Ezekiel, resurrection was a metaphor for his people's future. For John, the revival of Lazarus was a sign anticipating the resurrection of Jesus. For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus was a reality, the ground of our faith and the basis for our hope of sharing in Jesus' resurrection.

The reading from Ezekiel 37 is part of the famous vision of the valley of the dry bones. The prophet sees a vision of his people rising from death to life; he sees their dry bones coming to life again with flesh restored upon them. The vision is a grand metaphor of hope for Israel in exile in Babylon in the 6th century B.C.: the people that seemed to be dead will come to life again. That was Ezekiel's great hope.

The reading from John 11 tells how Jesus restored his friend Lazarus to life. It is the last and greatest of the seven "signs" or miracles that the Johannine Jesus performs during his public ministry. It is more than a resuscitation (since Lazarus has been dead for three days) and less than a resurrection (since we assume that Lazarus will die again). It is a sign pointing to the resurrection of Jesus. What Jesus does for Lazarus, his heavenly Father will do for Jesus—and more. Jesus will not die again. Indeed, in his resurrection Jesus will conquer death. Thus Jesus' restoration of Lazarus to life is a preview of Jesus' own resurrection from the dead.

The raising of Lazarus is first and foremost a sign about Jesus. The narrative emphasizes Jesus' personal affection for Lazarus and his sisters. He loves these people and shows compassion toward them. It also emphasizes Jesus' great power in his ability to restore Lazarus to life again. And it helps to explain what led to Jesus' arrest and execution, since this last public action by Jesus in John's Gospel arouses the jealousy and fears of his opponents and sets in motion the plot against him that leads to his execution.

The last great sign points us toward the Johannine passion narrative. It signifies that the death Jesus undergoes on Good Friday is not ultimately a defeat, since Jesus has power over death. The purpose of the raising of Lazarus was that God's glory might be made manifest in this event. It is a sign that Jesus' passion, death, resurrection and exaltation constitute one glorious event in the history of our salvation. Jesus' being lifted up on the cross is part of his being lifted up to eternal glory with his heavenly Father.

The Lazarus story has import for us. In the middle of the account, Jesus declares, "I am the resurrection and the life." He goes on to affirm that "whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Most of us are accustomed to regard "eternal life" as something that begins only when we die. But Jesus asserts that for those who believe in him, eternal life has already begun. Who we are now is what we shall be forever. For us, as for Jesus, physical death is not a defeat. Rather, it is another step on the way to fullness of life with God. For us eternal life has already begun, and the best is yet to come.

The reading from Romans 8 concerns the link between the resurrection of Jesus and our resurrection. Paul and other early Christians were convinced that Jesus had been raised from the dead. In fact, Paul identifies God as "the one who raised Christ from the dead."

The great corollary of belief in Jesus' resurrection is the possibility of our resurrection. Because Jesus has been raised from the dead, we too can hope to share in his resurrection. If the Holy Spirit dwells in us (as the beginning of our eternal life), that same Spirit can give us a full share in the resurrected life of Jesus. Thus Paul reminds us that Christian spirituality is based on Jesus' death and resurrection, that it is guided by the Holy Spirit dwelling within us and that we must respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. We can do so by prayer, the sacraments, good deeds, compassion for those in need, meeting the challenges of everyday life and cultivating the great Christian virtues of faith, hope and love.

Daniel J. Harrington

Praying With Scripture

- How does resurrection differ from resuscitation?
- In what ways is the revival of Lazarus the greatest sign performed by Jesus, according to John?
- Where does Jesus' resurrection fit in your spirituality?

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