

# America



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## Cosmology

The Really Big Picture

ADAM D. HINCKS

JOHN P. McCARTHY  
ON AN ITALIAN SATIRE

# OF MANY THINGS

**J**onathan Haidt's book *The Righteous Mind* is addressed to our national discontent. A study in moral psychology, it aims to explain why Americans are so polarized over politics and religion. Haidt's explanation? "The righteous mind," which means not only the human capacity to make moral judgments, but even more the tendency to be judgmental or "moralistic." "Righteousness," he argues, is essential to human society. Our overstated moral intuitions bind us in groups and divide us from others.

In the end, Haidt hopes to persuade conservatives and liberals to understand one another a little better and get along. Wisdom, he writes, "requires us all to take the logs out of our own eyes and then escape from our ceaseless, petty and divisive moralism." Liberals and conservatives are "the yin and yang" of a healthy society; they should learn from one another.

Haidt's insights go a long way toward elucidating the more vocal and unyielding attitudes we hear in everyday life. They invite us to think about moralistic behavior, a phenomenon we tend to overlook. They especially illuminate morally flat societies, like the United States today. Are we not the country where "Jersey Shore" is a pop sensation and "Survivor" allows middle-aged adults to play out the nightmare of *Lord of the Flies*? Ours is not a culture that values qualitative differences in moral judgments.

What is missing in *The Righteous Mind* is a sense of moral development, of growth and conversion in moral attitudes, of differences in moral perceptions that are rooted in differences in worth. After all, Mr. Haidt himself admits to a transformation from a liberal to a centrist persuasion in the course of his research. Mutual understanding and social harmony are more important to him now than when he was a straightforward liberal, valuing unhampered individual liberty.

How can we account for this

change? In Haidt-land people can and do change their moral views under the weight of gossip or the intense pressure of outspoken neighbors. But moral convictions also change for better reasons and out of experiences of better and finer quality. Men and women evolve in their attitudes to particular wars, like the Vietnam War, and to war itself. It took a lifetime, but Robert McNamara eventually confessed he had been mistaken about Vietnam. More to the point, during the cold war Henry Kissinger and George Schultz were practitioners of deterrence; now they argue for abolition of nuclear weapons.

We are not inevitably doomed by untutored moral intuitions and our feelings of righteousness in the ways Haidt suggests. In these cases about nuclear abolition, moral conversion took a rational form. Facts accumulated, contexts changed, principles evolved. Reasonable people changed their minds. Moral conversion also results from profound shifts in consciousness. It can arise in a series of awakenings, as it did for William Wilberforce confronting the slave trade, or in the form of an inescapable call, as it did to Martin Luther King Jr. during the Montgomery bus boycott. It can be forced on one by an unavoidable decision, as for Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Thinkers from Plato in the *Symposium* to Erik Erikson in *Gandhi's Truth* have traced paths of ascent in moral awareness and responsibility. Their idealized plot-lines may oversystematize what in life may be more random personal narratives of growth. But such trajectories reflect the fact that we humans can and do grow in moral awareness and the exercise of moral responsibility. If "Survivor" is not to remain the image of American society, the narratives of real-life moral heroes, sages and saints must take their place again in popular culture; and their strategies of moral growth must be ratified by our cultural institutions.

**DREW CHRISTIANSEN, S.J.**

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*Cover:* The helix nebula, a gaseous envelope expelled by a dying star. Photo: NASA, ESA, C.R. O'Dell (Vanderbilt University), M. Meixner and P. McCullough (STScI)

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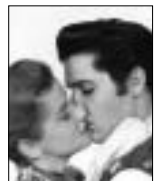
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### A Doctor for Development

At its meeting on April 21, the board of the World Bank, the world's largest development agency, will choose its next president. Nigeria's finance minister has been nominated, as has Dr. Jim Yong Kim, an Asian-American. Some nations would like to see a non-American in the president's seat for once, because Americans have occupied it since 1944, when the bank was established. But Dr. Kim is a stellar choice for the job and a credit to our nation.

Though Dr. Kim did not rise from poverty, his personal achievements are impressive. Born in Seoul and raised in Iowa by highly educated parents, Jim Yong Kim became a Harvard-educated physician and anthropologist, and chair of the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School. He was a highly effective director of the Department of H.I.V./AIDS at the World Health Organization and has co-founded two global health organizations. Partners in Health works with impoverished communities in Haiti, Peru and elsewhere; the Global Health Delivery Project improves public health in disadvantaged populations by maximizing health delivery systems. Dr. Kim, an expert on tuberculosis and a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant winner, is currently president of Dartmouth College in New Hampshire.

President Obama described the World Bank as "one of the most powerful tools we have to reduce poverty and raise standards of living in some of the poorest countries on the planet." As one who speaks three languages and has traveled widely for decades to improve world health, Dr. Kim's skills are a glove-like fit for a leadership post customarily held by a business executive.

### Latinos on the Move

As Latinos spread across the country, their influence within the U.S. electorate has become more complex and less predictable, as these three examples show.

While Latinos live primarily in the Southwest and Florida, with large populations in New York, New Jersey and Illinois, nearly half still live in just two states: California and Texas. But these geographic patterns are changing. Whereas in 2000, two-thirds of Latinos lived in the 50 counties with the largest Latino populations, 10 years later that percentage had shrunk to 59 percent. And in the interim, the Latino population of nearly every county in America grew; some doubled. These data, based on an analysis of the U.S. Census by the Pew Hispanic Center, contain other surprises.

Who would have thought that three of the 10 counties

with the fastest Latino growth rate would be in Georgia? Or that Texas would contain all 10 counties with the highest proportion of Latinos? In eight of those counties, the Latino population exceeds 90 percent of the total. In a representative democracy, that ought to translate into political clout, which has occurred to some extent. When Latino population growth enabled Texas to add four new House seats, the partisan redistricting battles went to the U.S. Supreme Court. After the ruling, only two of the four new districts reflected the Latino growth spurt. Still, Latinos gained influence.

Latino immigration is a third complicating factor. While immigrants themselves cannot vote, citizens tend to cast ballots based on their experience and perception of immigrants. Surprisingly, the percentage of Latinos who are foreign-born is greatest in Maryland, the District of Columbia and Alabama. After the November election, it may become clearer how native-born Latino and non-Hispanic voters took immigrants into consideration at the polls.

### Round and Round We Go

Here is a disturbing fact: close to a third of automobile traffic in some urban areas can be attributed to drivers looking for parking spaces. In other words, a notable number of city drivers are not traveling anywhere. They have already arrived and simply cannot find an appropriate place to stop.

Try not to dwell on the absurdity of this daily waltz. The practical problems are cause for worry enough. Higher pollution levels, excessive noise, congested streets—the headaches caused by roaming drivers are legion. And think of the personal costs. Spending your evening behind the wheel circling for parking is a waste of time and money no matter what may be on NPR.

What is city government to do? Restricting parking to local residents is one option. Another: raise parking meter rates to free up valuable street spaces. Yet these are only minor fixes. Cities like San Francisco and New York were not built for heavy car traffic, but they are now home to residents who have grown reliant on personal transportation. The U.S. car culture, nurtured on Eisenhower's highway system, has infected our cities. The proper solution is to reduce the number of cars through expanded mass transit and the promotion of bicycle use. Congestion pricing, a success in London but twice rejected in New York, also merits further consideration.

Frustrated motorists sometimes like to pray for a parking space. They might also offer up a prayer for city planners. Without their help, we may never escape the urban merry-go-round.

# ‘Stand Your Ground’

In Sanford, Fla., an African-American teenager in a hoodie and a self-appointed neighborhood guardian with a gun clashed on a dark night in late February. Trayvon Martin, 17, lay dead. George Zimmerman, 28, a former altar boy of white and Hispanic origin and a criminal justice major at Seminole State College, had pulled the trigger. Mr. Zimmerman had followed Mr. Martin, against the advice of a 911 operator. Over the last 14 months he had called police 46 times to report problems and suspicions in his gated community. Mr. Zimmerman has twice been accused of violence or criminal misconduct; but he has a concealed weapons permit and remains at large because Florida, like 23 other states, maintains a “stand your ground” statute that allows individuals to use deadly force if they have a “reasonable fear” of harm.

Mr. Martin, 6 feet 4 inches tall but weighing only 140 pounds, earned extra money washing cars. He babysat for his younger cousins. His offense that night was to be a black youth delivering a bag of Skittles to his soon-to-be step-brother. The Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson described the tragedy best: Mr. Martin may have been killed because of “the bull’s eye that black men wear throughout their lives” and for failing to obey “the vital imperative to never, ever be caught on the wrong street at the wrong time.”

Mr. Martin’s death has sounded a national wake-up call regarding the still imperfect status of race relations in the United States, but it also calls for an examination of a decades-long retreat from rational gun control. A brief period of legislative progress for gun control in the 1980s following the shooting of President Ronald Reagan was met by a counteroffensive from U.S. gun lobbies, principally the National Rifle Association, that continues to this day. Legislators and citizens who should have known better wearied of the struggle to better regulate America’s “militias,” thinking perhaps that gun-rights advocates would eventually be satisfied with various incremental victories against gun controls. But instead, each extension of gun-use rights has only provoked hunger for more.

What has been the effect of this unilateral cease-fire? Pro-gun rationalizations that used to be dismissed as parody have moved into the mainstream. Events at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech, the shootings in Tucson that left Gabrielle Gifford gravely wounded and other deadly incidents should have driven the nation toward more rational gun restrictions, but America has gone the other

way and seems closer to a gun-happy dystopia than ever before.

Thirty-six states have relaxed restrictions for concealed weapons permits under so-called “shall issue” procedures. Four states require no registration of handguns at all. Other states have severely curtailed common sense restrictions on where handguns may be carried. Now Second Amendment enthusiasts carry guns into shopping malls, bars, college campuses, restaurants, even churches. On March 21 Indiana’s Governor Mitch Daniels signed legislation that allows citizens to use deadly force against the police if they perceive police actions to be unlawful. This has created an entirely new arena for unintended, mortal collisions between police and the public.

In 2005 Florida became the first state to expand broadly the right to use deadly force for self-defense, obliterating the “duty to retreat” from threats in public places. In this new situation, once self-defense has been invoked, the burden is on the prosecution to disprove the claim. “Stand” laws have led to the multiplication of cases in which gang leaders, drug dealers and bar-room pugilists have killed those who have provoked them and gone free. Justifiable-homicide claims in Florida have more than tripled since the law was passed.

The incident in Sanford raises questions about race, ethnicity, neighborhood tensions and violence in U.S. culture. A common factor in these issues is the failure of politicians to stand up to the N.R.A. and insist that the safety of the nation’s young people, for example, has a higher priority than a gun-toter’s absolutized version of Second Amendment freedom. Trayvon Martin paid the ultimate price for the public’s declining interest in responsible limitations on gun ownership.

Even if Mr. Zimmerman is prosecuted, gun worship will remain. The Martin tragedy has not discouraged the N.R.A.’s current press for a national right-to-carry reciprocity bill that would nationalize concealed-carry permits. Only a national law that restricts who can own a gun or carry a concealed weapon and limits where guns may be kept can confront this crisis. Rational gun control might save the lives of future Trayvon Martins of every race and age entitled to walk city streets; but it will require courageous civic leaders who really value human life and will stand their ground against the N.R.A.



# SIGNS OF THE TIMES

CUBA / MEXICO


## Pope Benedict XVI, Our Man in Havana

**P**ope Benedict XVI's brief visit to Latin America included a stop-off in Mexico and ended a few days later in Cuba after a private meeting on March 26 with the aging former President Fidel Castro. The pope expressed his concerns about the ongoing violence of the drug war in Mexico and commented on the "schizophrenia" of Latin American Catholics who claim, for instance, to keep the faith but do not seem greatly concerned with the rising inequity in the region between its richest and poorest. "These individuals," he said, "are Catholic believers, but in their public lives they follow other paths that do not correspond to the great values of the Gospel."

As he returned to Rome on March 27, the pope also had some parting shots on the Havana tarmac for both Cuban socialism and the U.S. economic embargo of its one-time surrogate. "May no one feel excluded from taking up this exciting task" of spiritually and physically rebuilding Cuba, he said, "because of limitations of his or her basic freedoms, or excused by indolence or lack of material resources, a situation which is worsened when restrictive economic measures,

imposed from outside the country, unfairly burden its people."

The Cuba that Pope Benedict XVI visited is a country where the Catholic



Watching Pope Benedict XVI's caravan make its way to the airport in Havana on March 28

Church enjoys significantly more freedom and official recognition than it did when Blessed John Paul II made the first papal visit to the island in

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

## Federal Court Rules Against Contract Exception for Conference

**D**eeply mired in a controversy over a new mandate for the provision of contraception services, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services nevertheless remain partners in social services involving millions of dollars in federal funding and over the past year or so on one court docket in Massachusetts. On March 23 a U.S. District Court decision there added another layer of complexity to the ongoing dispute over religious liberty between the Obama administration and U.S. bishops.

Judge Richard Stearns ruled that

the terms of a Department of Health and Human Services contract with the U.S. bishops' Office of Migration and Refugee Services, as the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts charged, indeed constituted a violation of the First Amendment's establishment clause. Stevens decided a religious accommodation accepted by H.H.S. and written into the contract with M.R.S. allowed the bishops' agency to impose a religiously based restriction on the disbursement of taxpayer-funded services. That accommodation permitted M.R.S. to prohibit its social service subcontractors from providing abor-

tion or contraception counseling or services to trafficking victims.

Calling the ruling "a disappointment," Mary Ann Walsh, R.S.M., director of media relations for the bishops' conference, said, "The decision seems to ignore the right of free expression of one's religious beliefs." She added, "It's very likely that we would appeal." She said the conference's general counsel was reviewing the decision.

The Massachusetts A.C.L.U. had sued H.H.S. to contest the five-year contract for services for human trafficking victims awarded to M.R.S. The office had been hired as a national general contractor for social services for women escaping human trafficking. The office was not selected for a renewal of that service last year, launching one of the U.S.C.C.B.'s



1998. Cuba's Communist regime has made Christmas a national holiday, and it now allows party members to identify themselves as practicing

Catholics. Soon after the pope's departure, Good Friday was declared a national holiday.

But plenty of reminders of old-school Cuba remained. Prior to his arrival, security teams swept up many dissidents who threatened to provoke a scene during the pope's visit. Most were released soon after the pope left.

Pope Benedict, in public statements just before he arrived in Cuba and during his visit, affirmed the value of individual freedom. "The church is always on the side of freedom: freedom of conscience, freedom of religion," he told reporters on March 23. "God not only respects human freedom: He almost seems to require it," the pope said in his homily during a Mass in Santiago de Cuba on March 26. But addressing those frustrated by the pace of change in Cuba after half a century of Communism, the pope said that the "path of collaboration and constructive

dialogue" between church and regime there is long and "demands patience."

Before he departed, Pope Benedict, in a veiled reference to the U.S. embargo of Cuba, urged an end to geopolitical obstinacy and encouraged dialogue. "The present hour urgently demands that in personal, national and international co-existence we reject immovable positions and unilateral viewpoints that tend to make understanding more difficult and efforts at cooperation ineffective," the pope said.

Regarding his 30-minute private session with Fidel Castro, there were no bedside conversions to report; but according to the Vatican spokesperson Federico Lombardi, S.J., Castro's many questions for the pope were an indication that "now his life is one dedicated to reflection and writing." Lombardi added, "In the end, Commandante Fidel asked the pope to send him a few books" dealing with his questions.

ongoing conflicts over religious liberty with the Obama administration.

According to court documents, M.R.S. entered into subcontracts with over 100 service providers nationally; each contract included the restriction on abortion or birth control counseling. The Massachusetts A.C.L.U. argued that the government "would appear to have endorsed a Catholic belief" and impermissibly delegated discretion to the U.S. bishops.

Judge Richard G. Stearns agreed. He wrote, "Here...the restriction on the use of [federal] funds for abortion services and contraceptive materials is not a subject of truly voluntary participation; subcontracting organizations and trafficking victims cannot 'opt out' of the restriction without shouldering the financial burden of doing so.

"The government defendants' dele-

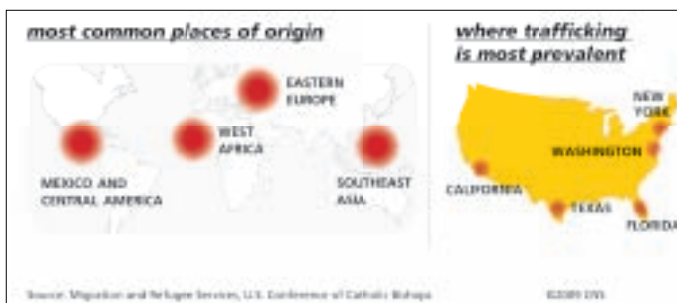
gation of authority to the U.S.C.C.B. to exclude certain services from government funding 'provides a significant symbolic benefit to religion,' in violation of the Establishment Clause," he added.

"To insist that the government respect the separation of church and state is not to discriminate against religion; indeed, it promotes a respect for religion by refusing to single out any creed for official favor at the expense of all others," the judge said.

Stevens added a final observation: "This case is not about government forcing a religious institution to act contrary to its most fundamental

beliefs. No one is arguing that the U.S.C.C.B. can be mandated by government to provide abortion or contraceptive services or be discriminated against for its refusal to do so. Rather, this case is about the limits of the government's ability to delegate to a religious institution the right to use taxpayer money to impose its beliefs on others (who may or may not share them)."

## HUMAN TRAFFICKING





## Appeal for Africa

Caritas Internationalis is launching an appeal for a preventive strike on hunger in West Africa's Sahel region. A poor harvest in 2011 and rising global commodity prices threaten as many as 12 million people with malnutrition. Nearly two million people face hunger in Burkina Faso alone, where the price of corn has increased by a third compared with 2010 and the production of grain has fallen by 16 percent. Caritas is launching an appeal for \$2.3 million to provide food and other aid for over 45,000 people in Burkina Faso. Caritas is also working across the Sahel region. "We must act now to avoid tragedy in the months to come," said the Rev. Isidore Ouedraogo, executive secretary of Caritas Burkina Faso. "Today, we are witnessing thousands of people who eat only one meal a day. By intervening now, Caritas will help them survive the lean season, when the lack of food is most acute."

## Amicus on Immigration

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and several other Christian denominations on March 26 filed an amicus curiae brief with the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of *Arizona v. United States*, supporting the principle that the federal government controls the enactment and implementation of the nation's immigration laws. Citing numerous examples of federal immigration policies designed to further family unity and human dignity, the brief argued that Arizona's immigration law is not a solution to the problems in federal law and in fact creates more problems than it solves. "The Catholic Church's religious faith, like that of many religious denominations, requires it to offer charity—

## NEWS BRIEFS

Christian human rights lawyer **Gao Zhisheng**, imprisoned in China's Xinjiang Province, was allowed a visit from his brother and father-in-law on March 24, the first time he has been seen since April 2010. • On March 29 the **Dalai Lama** was named the winner of the 2012 Templeton Prize, to be presented in London on May 14, because of his "incomparable global voice for universal ethics." • U.S. bishops announced on March 26 Vatican approval for the publication of a new **Rite for the Blessing of a Child in the Womb**. • More than 40,000 people from 41 countries and 47 U.S. states gathered in Anaheim, Calif., for the annual **Los Angeles Religious Education Congress** on March 23-25. • Bishop Fabio Colindres of El Salvador persuaded leaders of Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18, El Salvador's most notorious gangs, to end a wave of killings across the country after negotiating **better prison conditions** for 30 gang leaders. • On March 29 Nigerian Army troops stormed a neighborhood of Kaduna, Nigeria, and arrested 33 members of **Boko Haram**, an Islamist terrorist group suspected in a series of attacks against Christian churches.



**L.A. Religious Education Congress**

ranging from soup kitchens to homeless shelters—to all in need, whether they are present in this country legally or not. Yet SB 1070 and related state immigration laws have provisions that could...criminalize this charity...[or] exclude from that charity all those whose presence Arizona and other states would criminalize," the brief argued.

## Mixed Messages To Immigrants

In a presentation on March 24 at the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress, in Anaheim, Calif., Cardinal Roger M. Mahony pointed to Matthew 25 to find this sacred mandate—"For I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Cardinal Mahony dis-

cussed the major historical waves of immigration into the United States and spoke about the different backlash movements against immigrants. "The so-called 'flood of immigrants' has always alarmed some native-born Americans," he said. "Some feared job competition from foreigners. Others disliked the religion or politics of the newcomers. Has anyone heard that recently? We're still hearing the same thing today." Cardinal Mahony said the United States as a nation has been sending "two clear messages at the same time: 'no trespassing' and 'help wanted'; 'no, we don't want you here' and 'yes, we need you.' So that's created a big, big problem now and especially for the future."

From CNS and other sources.





# Early Spring

With wide eyes turned upward, holding our hands, the kids were mesmerized. “Can we touch them? Can we smell them? They look like clouds!” My father and I took turns hoisting the children up to be haloed in cherry blossoms. Spring came suddenly last week, unexpectedly in full petal all at once, spiking the temperatures so much that early crocuses and forsythia are uncharacteristically blooming side by side with late tulips and Washington’s famous cherry trees. The fairyland vistas are exquisite, except for the timing.

City planners had worked hard to prepare for the 100th anniversary of the day in 1912 when Mrs. William Howard Taft, the nation’s first lady, and the wife of the Japanese ambassador planted two trees at a ceremony celebrating the gift by the Japanese city of Tokyo of 3,000 cherry trees to Washington, D.C. The anniversary celebration was not scheduled to begin for another week. Spring came anyway.

My father-in-law died suddenly last week. He was an active, vigorous man, exquisitely carving inlaid wood in his workshop till the end, but death came anyway, ready or not. Each time I pass the front hall table he made for us, I finger the edges of the inlaid leaf, a doubting Thomas with my finger in the holes, processing. One minute the children say, “Granddaddy is in heaven.” The next, our three-year-old asks when will we next visit Granddaddy at his home. My parents came for the funeral. Afterward we enjoyed a wel-

come respite among the trees around the newest D.C. monument, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial. Visitors walk through a rectangle of granite (the mountain of despair) before coming upon Dr. King’s figure (the stone of hope). Perhaps it is my present mind-set or the timing of the liturgical year, but this felt like walking through a stone sarcophagus into blinding light, freedom and blossoms, resurrection.

The cherry blossoms also mark another anniversary. A year ago Japan’s earthquake unleashed a 65-foot wall of water that killed nearly 20,000 people suddenly and unexpectedly. The U.S. government, including military forces stationed in Japan, offered emergency humanitarian assistance, only to be caught off guard by a quickly deteriorating nuclear crisis at the Fukushima nuclear power plant. My husband, Dr. Richard Love, a U.S. government representative who works with the Japanese, was assigned to help coordinate the disaster response. We saw little of him for months.

How do you suddenly provide disaster assistance in the middle of a nuclear crisis, with no money in the midst of a budget crisis? Information and communications were challenged, both within the U.S. government and with the Japanese. The government does not have a playbook for providing assistance within a contaminated zone. My husband is helping to write one, proposing an all-hazard approach to guide future U.S. policy. Yet better planning may not help overcome the

human condition. People so shocked and saddened by death may be impaired in their crisis efforts to further safeguard life. Now, a year later, the plan is for the Fukushima nuclear power plant to be covered with a concrete sarcophagus to contain the radiation.

Tomioka, the Japanese town near those nuclear reactors, was known for its cherry blossom displays. The trees are now in bloom, but no one can enjoy them; the radiation levels are too high for the inhabitants to return. Over 320,000 people displaced by the quake and tsunami are still living in temporary shelters.


I cannot imagine how my husband’s Japanese colleagues grieve for so many loved ones dead, so suddenly and unexpectedly. Here we struggle as we miss just one. But I suspect we all know the rhythm of it, first the pain of crucifixion, the sharp thump of the nail, before the light and peace of resurrection.

There is an Easter story after such suffering, though. My Catholic University students often wonder if reconciliation after war is ever really possible. Look at Fukushima, I tell them. In 1945 the United States killed Japanese civilians with atomic weapons. A year ago Americans rushed to help save Japanese civilians from a nuclear accident.

“This was so nice of the Japanese to give us such beautiful cherry trees,” our 5-year-old remarked, glittering with petals. “Is this what heaven looks like?” He may be on to something.

We know the rhythm of it: the pain of crucifixion, the light and peace of resurrection.

MARYANN CUSIMANO LOVE is professor of international relations at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.



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# Wonders of the Universe

NEW SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERIES AND OLD TRUTHS  
BY ADAM D. HINCKS

**M**any Christians who learn about modern cosmology from popular sources wonder how new discoveries about the universe mesh with their faith. A host of questions may arise: What is the nature of the universe as a whole, and how did it come to be as it is now? Did it have a beginning in time, or has it undergone cycles of birth and destruction? Is the cosmos infinite in its extent? Are the laws of nature the same everywhere? Cosmology is a branch of astronomy that seeks to answer questions like these. It is the science of the universe on the largest scales of space and time. These days, it is progressing by leaps and bounds.

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ADAM D. HINCKS, S.J., is studying philosophy at Regis College, University of Toronto. Before entering the Society of Jesus, he earned a doctorate in physics at Princeton University, specializing in observational cosmology.

In my experience, most popular curiosity about cosmology boils down to two issues: beginning and bigness. Does current science support the Christian doctrine that in the beginning God created the universe from nothing? And now that we know that the universe is so much bigger than the biblical authors believed, does that change how we ought to conceive of its creator and God's relationship with us?

These questions, though profound, are not new. Modern cosmology might keep these questions relevant and give them freshness, but it does not significantly alter the theological terrain. It is not my intention, however, to deflate interest in integrating scientific discovery with religious faith. Once these questions are put in proper perspective, the real value of today's cosmology for Christian faith can shine through.

## A Tour of the Universe

We live in an exciting era for cosmology. Although ingenious and profound cosmological theories have been proposed throughout history and across cultures, only relatively recently have astronomers been able to start figuring out which theories are actually right—and to discover that there are new puzzles to be solved.

The medium of astronomy is light. The spectacular advances in cosmology over the past century are thanks in large part to the increasing size of telescopes and the increasingly sensitive cameras that can capture more and more of the precious light coming from the heavens.

With the help of such improvements, scientists established for sure, less than 100 years ago, that our own Milky Way, itself made up of a few hundred million stars, is but one galaxy among a multitude. Today we know that we are part of a "local group" of about 50 galaxies in a volume roughly 10 million light years across. (A light-year is the distance light travels in one year—about six trillion miles. To get a sense of scale, the sun is about eight light-minutes from the earth, the next nearest star is four light-years away, and the Milky Way is about a hundred thousand light-years in diameter.) Our local group is not alone. Everywhere we look, we see other groups of galaxies, some large, some small, numbering in the billions. The universe is truly gigantic.

Since light travels at a finite speed, looking farther in distance means peering further back in time. This has allowed us not only to study the universe as it looks today, but to understand its history. For about 50 years now, it has been

clear that the universe is expanding. The universe began as a tiny seed 14 billion years ago and has been growing ever since. With powerful telescopes, we can detect the faint glow of microwave light that the infant universe emitted just after its birth, when it was a thousand times smaller than today and before stars and galaxies had even been formed.

What is expanding is space itself. Imagine galaxies as dots painted on a giant rubber sheet. It is not that the dots themselves are moving, but that the rubber sheet—space—is being stretched, pulling them along with it. The universe

is not expanding into anything; the very space in which stars, galaxies, planets and everything else exist is stretching, causing the distances between all its contents to grow.

The fact that we have been able to determine this much is what makes cosmology today exciting. What makes things equally exciting is that there are new questions to be answered. Although it is clear that the universe as we know it began in some kind of Big Bang, the physics of the very few instants is not understood. It is not known what might have triggered the universe's expansion, nor what things were like before that time.

There is also this puzzle: the ordinary matter that forms planets, stars and galaxies—hydrogen, helium and the other atomic elements we learn about in chemistry class—cannot account for all the gravitational strength we observe in the heavens. The rotation and interaction of galaxies, as well as the rate of expansion of the universe, all indicate that there is a large quantity of dark matter contributing to gravity's pull. We have very little idea what this dark matter is made of. Even more surprising was the discovery in the late 1990s that the universe is not only expanding; it is expanding more and more rapidly. Since gravity would tend to slow the expansion, there must be some mysterious force pushing everything apart. We call it dark energy. When everything is added up, the universe is made up of about 72 percent dark energy, 23 percent dark matter and just 5 percent atoms, or "regular" matter. Although we can describe its evolution, we still do not know what 95 percent of the universe is actually made of.

## New Science, Old Questions

This brief summary does not do justice to the scope and richness of modern cosmology and astrophysics, but it should lead to an understanding of how to approach the religious questions that arise about the universe's origin and size.

Through much of Western history, it was thought that the motions of the heavens were regular and unchanging.

## New cosmological discoveries remind us of the wonder we ought to have before creation.



The Christian notion that the cosmos had a beginning in time had to be accepted as an article of faith. With the advent of the Big Bang theory, it might seem that science corroborates revelation, but it is not that simple. The first instants of the Big Bang are not understood. Perhaps it really was the temporal beginning of the universe, but it is also possible that the universe existed in some prior state before the Big Bang. Some leading theorists have even developed cyclical models involving higher dimensions, where the Big Bang repeats itself over and over again.

Today's science does not say whether the universe was created from nothing. It is arguably not even a question for physical science. St. Thomas Aquinas taught that the temporal beginning of creation is known only by faith, and cautioned anyone trying to prove it using either philosophy or science. His reason is especially pertinent today: "lest anyone, presuming to demonstrate what is of faith, should bring forward reasons that are not cogent, so as to give occasion to unbelievers to laugh, thinking that on such grounds we believe things that are of faith."

There is similar continuity regarding the universe's bigness. Although modern cosmology allows us to speak in more quantitative terms about the size of the cosmos, people have always known that it is big. Even in the Middle Ages, when people believed that the earth was the center of the universe, it was taught that the earth is so small com-

pared to the rest of creation that it should be treated like a mathematical point. One medieval author whimsically reported that if one traveled vertically at a rate of 40 miles per day, it would take more than 8,000 years to reach the firmament of stars—a distance of more than 100 million miles!

To the human imagination, big is big. Whether the distance to the nearest stars is 100 million miles or, as we know now, 25 trillion miles, the size is beyond the range of human imagination. This explains why people throughout history have reacted in a similar way before the scale of the cosmos. The author of Psalm 8, writing thousands of years ago, did not need to have exact numerical measurements to exclaim in wonder to the Lord:

*When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,  
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for them?*

The rest of the psalm implicitly answers the perennial question it asks. Physical bigness makes no difference to God. Perhaps it is the opposite. After all, David defeated Goliath, and Jesus decided to dine with Zacchaeus. The humility with which God took flesh, who "made himself nothing...being made in human likeness" (Phil 2:7), strikes

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home when we consider how small that really was. It obliterates any notion that God's love depends on size.

## Contemplatives Beneath the Heavens

If modern cosmology does not provide new theological insight into questions of origins or bigness, one can discover anew the lessons of old.

New cosmological discoveries remind us of the wonder we ought to have before creation. Unlike our ancestors, who saw the stars above them every night, many city-dwellers, surrounded by artificial lights 24 hours a day, have been cut off from the heavens. Half the world's population is now urbanized, and the fraction is growing. Ironically, despite our great scientific knowledge, we may be regressing in our aesthetic experience of the night sky, for we rarely see it. A connection with the heavens was important to the psalmist and to other biblical authors. We could also look to St. Ignatius Loyola, who during one period derived his greatest spiritual consolation from contemplating the stars.


We can today reclaim an aesthetic appreciation for the cosmos, but we have to be more intentional than our forebears, who needed only to wander outside after dark. The beautiful images and fascinating discoveries that come from modern observatories are an excellent aid. As Christians, we

ought to welcome astronomical research. Not only will it dispel the tiresome but tenacious myth that Christianity is hostile to science; more important, it will help us be better contemplatives.

This attitude can also put theological questions like that about the temporal beginning of the universe in proper perspective. Instead of being disappointed that physical science is incapable of clarifying religious or metaphysical questions, we ought to be grateful for the authentic complementarity

between religion and science. Physical cosmology cannot tell us whether or not the universe was created *ex nihilo*, but it does something better. It tells us things that divine revelation never has: how long ago the Big Bang occurred; how the first stars

came to coalesce out of the expanding, primordial gas; how galaxies have grown, interacted and merged. It is also revealing wonders that we never expected, like the fact that ordinary matter makes up only a small fraction of the material in the universe, or that there is an energy field stronger than gravity accelerating the expansion of space.

"The heavens declare the glory of God," Psalm 19 begins. As science continues to uncover the beauties of the heavens, we hear that voice more clearly. We understand more of the work that the Divine Artist has wrought and continues to accomplish. And in doing so, we give God greater glory. 

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# The Waiting

A student discerns a call to religious life.

BY CATHERINE KIRWAN-AVILA

“So you’re probably going to become a nun, right?” my best college girlfriend said casually as we chatted about my post-grad-school plans.

“I don’t know for sure,” I replied, “but it’s a distinct possibility.” The question surprised me both because it was so nonchalant and because it had come from a woman with a fairly comprehensive view of who I am. She has seen the good, the bad and the un-nunly. Yet there was no trace of “Are you sure?” in her voice. Were we really past the point of endless questioning? Was my future as a woman religious more or less settled?

Not quite. A nun friend observed that I would drive myself crazy until I made some decisions. God’s timetable is a little different from mine.

Last spring I knew it was time to give serious consideration to the niggling feeling in my gut. I was in a relationship with someone who had been a dear friend for several years and was, by all standards, a fantastic boyfriend. Ending that relationship was painful, and on several occasions I found myself shaking my fist in God’s general direction. Life suddenly seemed less predictable and a whole lot scarier. “Please help” and “this better be good,” were sometimes the only prayers I could muster.

In spite of this, I felt a sense of pur-

pose for discovering what was in store. Unexpected angels provided tips. A friend from my parish offered to connect me with a young woman who had



recently entered religious life. Another told me about a group of Ignatian sisters in Georgia she thought I might like to meet. Old friends responded with support and encouragement.

*You will know*, say most of the wise women I talk with as I ponder a religious vocation. *There will come a point when you have an answer*. I’m holding out for that.

The groundwork for my vocational questions was laid early. My parents taught me to value justice and community and to take responsibility for my own life. They instilled in me appreciation for the dignity of all people and taught me about God’s love by offering me their own unconditional love. I grew up learning that we are put on earth to do good, help others and be happy. While my parents support my quest, they have concerns about the possibility that I may join a religious order. I am an only child, and it is an

adjustment and a loss for them to imagine a future without grandchildren. More than that, they are disturbed by attitudes and actions in the church that contradict the spirit of humility and transparency the Gospel teaches. They balance support and skepticism, but offer love and respect.

## Two Years in Bolivia

Experience also leads me to believe an answer will come. I spent two challenging and invigorating years after college in Bolivia with Jesuit Volunteers International that grew my faith and informed my sense of global community. Right through the orientation process, however, I was consumed with uncertainty as to whether I was truly called to Bolivia.

On a silent retreat, a part of our orientation, I was anxious and uncomfortable, not knowing how I would stay quiet in the company of the 20 amazing people I had just met and dreading the prospect of spending the time alone. What if I discovered something I didn’t want to know? I stocked up on spiritual books from the library, but as I flipped through them I realized that I wasn’t sure what I was looking for. I met with one of the spiritual directors, a quiet, funny nun and excellent listener. She gently asked if perhaps I was trying too hard and suggested that I try “wasting time with God.” “Go for a walk, take a nap, pray, just invite God into it.”

Her advice changed the whole experience. It was permission to allow

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CATHERINE KIRWAN-AVILA is a graduate student at the School of Social Work at Boston College and a resident of Roxbury, Mass.



God the space to work, and it reminded me to have some faith. I asked God for guidance and trusted that I would get what I needed.

Eventually, an answer came. Walking in silence one night, I saw a future community-mate seated at a piano, improvising a beautiful song. I listened and something fell into place: I had a breathtaking sense of being loved and provided for and was acutely aware of God's closeness. Never before and never since have I felt so completely blessed and certain that I was precisely where I was meant to be. I decided to say yes to going to Bolivia. I had fallen in love with God and with the life I was offered. I had no idea what that life would hold, but I was certain I would not be alone.

In Bolivia I worked with Jesuits and an inspiring group of sisters from the Misioneras de Cristo Jesús. They appeared completely alive, and they had a global sense of community. Their

faith was constantly evolving, which I found exciting and admirable, particularly among older women. The experience of immersing myself in a new culture was humbling, exciting and deeply spiritual. I imagined what it would be like to live as the Misioneras did.

When I returned home five years ago, dating, work, exploring a new city and friendships occupied my time and energies. I craved spiritual community, found a vibrant parish, became part of a small faith group and began spiritual direction. I continued to meet women religious whom I admired. I coordinated an adolescent mentoring program in Boston and collaborated with other youth advocates to strengthen supports for the young people we worked with. It was powerful work that I found fun, gratifying and full of small miracles.

### Steps Toward Discernment

The steps of my current discernment

process have included conversations, reading, prayer and visits to religious communities. I have visited two orders and spent two weeks over the summer with a community in Georgia. On that visit, I participated in a weekend discernment retreat and worked alongside a small community of sisters. I marveled at the energy to serve that they drew from prayer and their sense of mission. This spring I am visiting their novitiate and spending time with the women in formation.

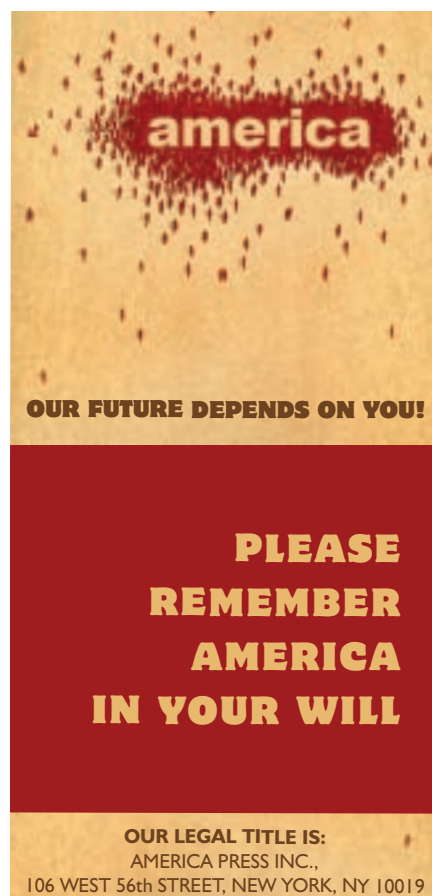
I have also sought mentors. Many women and men (vowed religious and lay) have been generous with their time and stories. I have connected with an accomplished, vivacious sister who revealed that she had never wanted to enter religious life as a young woman and had been a "grand failure" as a young nun, only later coming to understand her own path to the convent; with a mother, educator and parish leader who decided to live in a



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troubled area of Boston and build partnerships to increase community empowerment; with a Nicaraguan priest who has learned that the point of life is to arrive at the end having poured oneself out; and with my father, whose Buddhist practice opens up fresh realms of conversation about prayer and compassion. These conversations have given me a sense of companionship.

Last November I began the Spiritual Exercises in daily life, a retreat over many months aimed to help participants grow closer to God and learn to discern where God calls us.

Drawn to cross-cultural work, I am also looking at orders with international communities that have other young women in formation. I grapple with the role of international aid and mission and my own place in it, but I think there is much richness in learning and sharing across borders. I seek

peers who understand this path.

The women religious who have most inspired me balance reverence with brave willingness to question the status quo. They are grounded in humility and a sense of their own humanity; they embrace critical thinking and dialogue about the church and its evolving mission.

Currently, I take care of an old rectory at St. Mary of the Angels parish, study social work at Boston College, work as an intern at two nonprofits, mentor a group of undergraduate students, continue my Spiritual Exercises retreat and spend time with friends and family. Living at the parish has been a gift. I moved in to save money and because I thought it would be an adventure. Lovingly referred to as a little United Nations, the parish is diverse and has a proud history of community involvement. During Advent, I was struck by how tangible the idea of community had become for

me since moving to St. Mary's. My own vocational discernment becomes most clear among a group of people who worship, argue and work together, a group that welcomes newcomers and strives to respond faithfully and lovingly to God's call.

I graduate in May; the unknown thereafter is both exciting and daunting. I will have loans to pay off, so I may not be able to enter any order for several more years. Yet my vocation is already underway, even in this time of uncertainty.

Reflecting on the last five years, I feel my heart swell at how God has revealed Godself to me over and over through relationships, readings, conversations and prayer. Patience and trust seem like small things to ask. Father Greg Boyle, the Jesuit author, notes that "grateful people are happy people." I agree. As I grow into an understanding of my vocation, I try to make daily use of his formula. **A**



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FILM | JOHN P. MCCARTHY

## VOCATION CRISIS

*'Habemus Papam,' an Italian satire*

What if I told you a new movie, set at the Vatican during a papal conclave, has much in common with HBO's mob drama "The Sopranos" and also with the Audrey Hepburn-Gregory Peck romance "Roman Holiday" (1953)? Would you be intrigued? Suspicious? Nostalgic?

**Habemus Papam** ("We Have a Pope"), by the Italian satirist Nanni Moretti, evokes a complicated set of reactions. You'll be relieved to learn the "Sopranos" connection has nothing to do with Mafia-like mayhem or larceny; and no major character, including multiple "princes of the church," forms an untoward romantic alliance. Still, don't expect a flattering portrait of the hierarchy or inspirational fare like "The Shoes of the Fisherman" (1963).

Taking place in the present day, "Habemus Papam" centers on an obscure cardinal who is elected pope. Like the Jersey boss Tony Soprano, the stunned prelate suffers a major panic attack and sees a psychiatrist. Catholics will be drawn to the well-made picture by its subject matter yet are likely to be saddened by what ultimately transpires.

Director Moretti, who co-wrote the script and plays the pope's shrink, presents a moving, unsettling and often humorous piece. He depicts the church hierarchy, specifically the College of Cardinals, in a satirical manner that borders on farce. But he infuses the portrait with enough believability and emotional authentic-

ty to counter its more surreal and anti-theatrical notes.

The film never comes off as cynical or blindly critical. Moretti, whose previous film "The Caiman" lampooned Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, is not a believer. But he respects Catholicism enough to treat the psychology of faith with subtlety and sophistication. If you'll pardon an oxymoron, the tone can be described as cheekily reverent.

The movie opens with file footage of an unnamed pontiff's funeral Mass, after which chanting cardinals are shown entering the Sistine Chapel to elect a successor. We are privy to the interior thoughts of the leading candidates, each of whom dreads becoming the Holy Father. Their relief is palpable when, following several votes, the dark horse Cardinal Melville (portrayed by the august French actor Michel Piccoli) is chosen. But just as he is about to appear on the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square, Melville balks and refuses to proceed. After a medical examination, Rome's preeminent psychoanalyst is brought in to offer an opinion.

The parallels with "Roman Holiday" arise after Melville is secretly taken from Vatican City to visit another psychiatrist (the first therapist's ex-wife) and bolts. He wanders Rome incognito, like Hepburn's royal princess in the William Wyler classic. Melville rubs shoulders with ordinary Romans and meets an acting troupe rehearsing Chekov's "The Seagull." Meanwhile, the cardinals remain

sequestered, and the world waits to learn the identity of the new pope. Afraid to admit the pope has gone AWOL, the Vatican spokesman enlists a member of the Swiss Guard to make it appear as though Melville is holed up in the papal apartments.

How will this calamitous charade, the ultimate vocational crisis for a prelate, be resolved? Convinced he is incapable of serving, Melville wanders in a state of pitiable anguish and confusion, probably experiencing the onset of senile dementia. We cannot help but wonder whether his reluctance is fueled by humility or selfish weakness.

Moretti and his two co-writers are coy about addressing Melville's faith in God and sidestep the most significant possible cause for his breakdown. The script does not examine anyone's motivations or psychic make-up in detail, partly because it also makes light of the psychiatric profession and the rather passé Freudian approach taken by the analysts who (briefly) treat Melville. The movie comes closest to explaining Melville's behavior in the scene in which he confides that before becoming a priest he desperately wanted to be an actor. It is telling that an unhinged thespian from the Chekov troupe functions as a doppelganger of sorts.

We are left to infer that Melville was chosen not because his fellow cardinals thought him able or willing, but because they were eager to pass the buck. The male psychiatrist, whom Moretti limns with hilarious insouciance, appears quite batty himself. Confined to the Vatican for three days while Melville is on the loose, he becomes chummy with the cardinals. He even organizes a volleyball tournament, dividing the conclave into teams based on geographic region. Gently



Nanni Moretti and Michel Piccoli in “Habemus Papam”

absurd, these segments provide the occasion for a few inside-the-Curia jokes. Some viewers may not appreciate seeing red hats doffing their dignity. But the sequence underscores the idea that everyone in the movie’s universe is a little loopy, which is to say, flawed and therefore human.

Moretti’s skill at identifying every individual’s frailty and the absurdity in every scenario makes the film’s operatically somber and sudden ending all the more jarring. Watching the doleful conclusion, Catholics will likely grow defensive, their fealty toward the church and respect for the papacy sharpening. Our expectation as moviegoers that things will end well adds to the sting. My initial response was shock and indignation, mingled with the knee-jerk criticism that the plot of “Habemus Papam” is woefully underdeveloped.

What is Moretti trying to say? The

most obvious interpretation is that Melville’s breakdown mirrors the church’s recent mistakes and misdeeds; the election of such an unstable bishop reflects a broken institution and a colossal failure of leadership. When Melville is told he was the victim of “parental deficit,” we are reminded of the hierarchy’s inability to protect victims of clergy sexual abuse.

While it is possible to interpret “Habemus Papam” as a condemnation of the church or a secular broadside against religion, it is more instructively taken as a parable about moral psychology. Melville’s doubts about his own suitability to succeed St. Peter are extreme. Surely belief ought not to be, and arguably cannot be, feigned in this context. Popes are not immune from doubt, but the test, as with any believer, is whether those misgivings are accompanied by sincerity. In other words, it is a matter of conscience

between Melville and God. It is impossible for another human to parse his soul and judge his actions. Put indelicately, if Melville cannot shake the feeling that he is a fraud, it is likely he is a fraud—provided he ignores that self-knowledge. Seen in this light, we can better process Melville’s reluctance to commit.

Melville’s faith crisis is no different in kind from that of any other priest. Analogously, the frustration Hepburn’s princess in “Roman Holiday” feels about her duty-filled life is comparable to that of, say, a young woman in the 1950s who finds her secretarial job stultifying. When it comes to the princess and the secretary, we would be quicker to counsel staying the course until something better comes along, or, alternatively, suggesting an abrupt change in circumstances. Regarding the parish priest and the Bishop of Rome, it is possible that God’s grace, along with more prayer and deeper discernment, might enable either man to grow into his respective role. But unless

#### ON THE WEB

Mary Valle reviews  
 “God Is the Bigger Elvis.”  
[americamagazine.org/culture](http://americamagazine.org/culture)



there is honesty and a solid faith foundation, going through the motions would be morally suspect and potentially disastrous. Evidently Melville understands this.

Still, he leaves the church in an uncertain position as the film ends. The discomfort, if not the sorrow, this evokes in the audience recalls the black-out finale of “The Sopranos,” when the fate befalling Tony and his immediate family is never revealed. It is natural to prefer the certainty of a tidy ending in which a fictional protagonist, good or evil, receives his just desserts. Such resolutions, particularly of the feel-good variety, are often associated with traditional Hollywood entertainments. In actual fact, rarely are the endings of classic films as cut-and-dried or pat as we assume. As in life, most desires remain unfulfilled.

At the end of “Roman Holiday,” Hepburn’s princess returns to her min-

ders and resumes her official duties. Although she is in love with Peck’s American journalist, they do not run away together; nor is a courtship with a commoner in the offing. Both have grown more fully human during their whirlwind romance, yet realism and practicality win out. Their pain will pass. The trauma endured by Melville and the church in “Habemus Papam” will take longer to heal, but the alternative could be worse. Judging by what Moretti shows us, we see that only in a fantasy realm tenuously linked to reality could Cardinal Melville’s papacy be a success. Yet according to Catholic belief, no matter how bad things get, hope and the possibility of renewal will never be extinguished as long as we strive to love God with pure hearts.

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JOHN P. MCCARTHY *reviews films for Catholic News Service and various publications.*

missed as naïve and incompetent becomes an engaging mystery and an enjoyable primer on the ecclesiastical wheeling and dealing of the late Middle Ages.

Peter Morrone, the future Pope Celestine V, was born in 1209. He found his calling at the age of 21, when he left a Benedictine monastery to live alone atop a mountain. Later he studied in Rome, where he was ordained. Then he returned to the hermit life, settling first on the 6,700-foot Mount Morrone in the Apennines and then on the even taller Mount Maiella (9,100 feet). Renowned for his holiness, he formed a community of hermits during the 1240s and gained papal approval for his congregation in 1263.

Unfurling the story, Sweeney shows how the reclusive holy man was a savvy player in the iron-fisted ecclesial politics of the time. He notes that Peter traveled 700 miles to be at the Council of Lyons in 1274, fighting for his Hermits of Saint Damian at a time when church authorities wanted to stop the proliferation of new orders. He persuaded Pope Gregory X to let his hermits be incorporated as a branch of the Benedictines and secured Charles I of Anjou, king of Naples and younger brother of King Louis IX, as their protector.

Acting on what he said was a vision of the Blessed Virgin in a dream, he built the Basilica of Santa Maria in Collemaggio in Abruzzo; it quickly attracted pilgrims and increased the prestige of his order, later called the Celestines. He founded and acquired new monasteries and visited Rome, where he was applauded. In 1293 he returned to Mount Morrone to live in solitude.

The point Sweeney makes is that for nearly all of his long life, no one would have called Peter Morrone naïve or incompetent. When Peter spoke, powerful people listened—unfortunately for him, it turned out.

BOOKS | PAUL MOSES

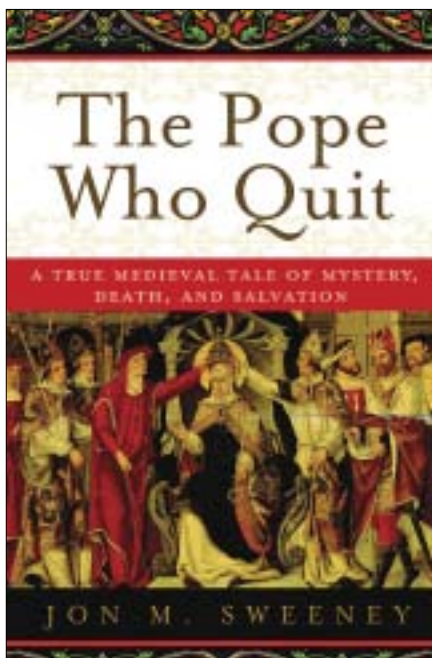
## CELESTINE’S PROPHECY

### THE POPE WHO QUIT A True Medieval Tale of Mystery, Death, and Salvation

By Jon M. Sweeney  
Image Books. 304p \$14 (paperback)

Celestine V, the pope who quit, is remembered mostly as a footnote. Histories of the popes treat him as a medieval curiosity. Dante condemned him to the inferno for his cowardice. More recently, his resignation has been viewed as the odd precedent that would permit an ailing pope to step down.

Jon M. Sweeney, whose many books include *Praying With Our Hands*, has recognized that this story of a sainted hermit who was stunned to be elected vicar of Christ—and then resigned the papacy 15 weeks later—is an entertaining tale in itself and one that serves



to remind us of the intrigues embedded in Catholic tradition. In Sweeney’s hands, the story of a man often dis-



Observing from his mountaintop, Peter became frustrated in 1294 with a two-year deadlock in choosing a pope. He dispatched a letter to the cardinals warning that the wrath of God would fall on those responsible for such inaction.

Thus Peter became the compromise, a caretaker pope elected at the age of 84. In some ways, the choice might even have seemed inspired, raising the hope that a truly holy man would be the one to lead the medieval church out of its corrupt ways. In that light, Celestine V's decision to rule from outside Rome—he was crowned in his basilica in Abruzzo—could seem wise. He was the outside-the-Beltway pope.

But he immediately became a puppet of Charles II of Anjou (son of Charles I), and in his 15 disastrous weeks as pope made one bad decision after another. Some were self-serving; he granted a plenary indulgence to anyone who attended his coronation or visited his basilica on the anniversary. Mostly, he just did what Charles wanted, turning the papacy into the monarch's patronage pool. Ill at ease with the power handed to him, he turned over many of his duties to a trio of cardinals. Finally he stood up for himself and against Charles II: He announced that he would resign, the first and only pope to do so.

This had to be cleared by canon law; it was determined that if the resignation was voluntary, enacted properly and absolutely necessary—if the pope was useless or suffered a serious impediment such as insanity—resignation would be acceptable.

The holy man, officially deemed useless, fled. But his authoritarian successor, Pope Boniface VIII, was evidently uneasy with having another pope about and ordered him imprisoned. It is “not far-fetched” to suggest that Boniface had Peter murdered, Sweeney writes, although after examining the evidence he decided that the

matter is unclear.

The book does not dig up any new answers to the questions surrounding Pope Celestine, but Sweeney's tale is a pleasure to read, written very smoothly for a general audience. He keeps it interesting throughout, and there is a note of enchantment in it.

Since the reliable historical record on Peter Morrone is thin, there is a fair amount of speculation in the account. To fill out the story, Sweeney weaves in a great deal of background on the period to produce a larger and more detailed tapestry. On a few points, the background is overly simplified, but on the whole it adds to the landscape by

providing helpful context. Even when not strictly necessary, the excursions are interesting.

There are sections, for example, on the many popes who were murdered, intrigue at the Council of Lyons, and the origins of canon law. While reading this book, I often felt as if I were walking through a medieval hill town, on my way up to the castle, when a winding lane would catch my eye and draw me aside. I sometimes wondered if I was being taken to a dead end, but these side trips eventually led back to the main street, and I was glad I went.

Ultimately, it is difficult to judge Celestine. Good people suffered as a

## The Lonely Place Apart

When you think of the place,  
the place apart  
think of Nova Scotia,  
of Maud Lewis  
painting  
red and yellow tulips,  
butterflies  
and little black kittens  
on scallop shells  
in the dry stagnant empty recess of winter.  
And this with two hands so crippled  
that one was required to rest on the other for support –  
overlapping as if in prayer.  
And this, her offering,  
with a smile that said,  
*Here.*  
*Here is a part of my lonely place.*

DARRIN M. McCLOSKEY

DARRIN M. McCLOSKEY, born and raised on Prince Edward Island, Canada, now teaches ESL in Vancouver. His poem is a meditation on Mt 14:13 and 22:14.

result of his abdication. Look at it from the point of view of the Spiritual Franciscans, the dissident Franciscans whom Boniface VIII persecuted for the sin of insisting on living the life of poverty as rigorously as had their founder, Francis of Assisi. Celestine, no stranger to the ascetic life, had been the Spiritual Franciscans' friend. He was not any good to them after he quit. And yet, contrary to Dante's verdict, St. Pope Celestine V was canonized in 1313 by Pope Clement V; his feast day is May 19.

Sweeney concludes that Celestine's

life should not be reduced to the cowardice of his resignation. He knew he should not have accepted the papacy, he writes. "His sanest expectations were confirmed within weeks of ascending the chair of St. Peter, prompting him to make the decision that would save his soul—if not the Church," he adds. "And for that single act, he showed himself to be enlightened, not naïve."

---

**PAUL MOSES**, professor of journalism at Brooklyn College/CUNY, is the author of *The Saint and the Sultan: the Crusades, Islam and Francis of Assisi's Mission of Peace*.

THOMAS P. RAUSCH

## THE WORKER'S TALE

---

### **BROKEN AND SHARED Food, Dignity, and the Poor On Los Angeles' Skid Row**

By Jeff Dietrich

Marymount Institute Press. 450p  
\$29.95

For over 40 years Jeff Dietrich has been a member of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker community, serving meals to the poor of the city's Skid Row, writing for the community's appropriately named newspaper, the *Catholic Agitator*, and doing jail time for various protests and acts of civil disobedience on behalf of justice, peace and the forgotten poor of our inner cities. More than 40 times he has been arrested. *Broken and Shared* is a powerful collection of essays written over those years.

In the introduction he tell us how he rediscovered his Catholic faith. To avoid induction into the military during the Vietnam War, he had fled to Europe; on his return he encountered some Catholic Worker members who offered him hospitality. They were, he says, people doing what Jesus would be

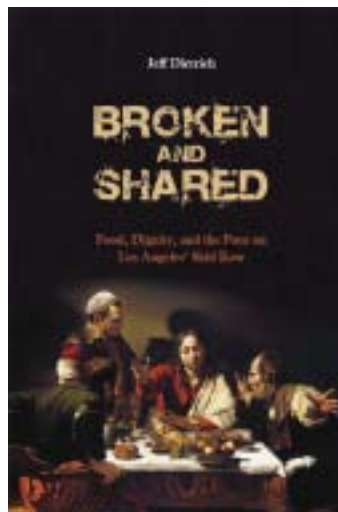
doing, "feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and burning draft files." A light went on in his head that was to change his life.

Dietrich writes with a keen eye for detail and a sense of humor; the book is both passionate and personal. One chapter describes the Catholic Worker campaign to provide the city's homeless with their own registered shopping carts, eventually totaling over 50,000. Several describe his prison experience, recounting to his wife Catherine Morris the constant threat of violence, his fear of rape and gratitude for a cup of coffee from a guard, even more precious for its acknowledgement of a shared humanity. Another describes the indignity of strip searches and the probing of his body cavities, the hours-long wait in the cold of a basement cell for his hearing, the intimidation of the court process.

Several chapters are on the church, the eternal conflict between the church institutional and the prophetic. Citing Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker, he argues movingly for fidelity to the church in spite of what he sees as its many sins and its "really orthodox" members who speak of the magisterium "as if the poor Holy Spirit has been locked in a tiny box in the basement of the Vatican, to be consulted only by the Pope during encyclical season." And yet he still goes to Mass, unlike many of his fellow community members today, because the church gives us the faith, the Gospel and the Eucharist and is the church of Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa, the Berrigans, César Chávez, Oscar Romero and the many Catholics who support their community, and he wants to be in communion with them.

Most of the book is about the exploitation of the poor and vulnerable, a critique of "empire" with its military, religious and economic might, the "Arms Bazaar" that the Catholic Worker helped to drive out of

Anaheim in 1980; the credit economy with its greed and competition, so different from the "Sabbath economics" of Leviticus 25, which calls for the cancelling of debts at seven year intervals; industrial agriculture, which that floods the environment with chemicals and leaves poor farmers unable to compete; the war on drugs that fills our



prisons with the poor, largely African-Americans, supporting the "prison industrial complex"; technology that prizes production and power over peace; blood banks that purchase blood from the poor with insufficient remuneration and health care; the

city's Safer Cities Initiative, really a program to get the homeless off the streets; and the hugely expensive war in Iraq paid for by cuts in public health care, transportation and education, all of which affect the poor, while the wealthy receive tax breaks.

His vision is rooted in the Gospel story, in the counter-intuitive approach of Jesus, who condemned trying to cast out Satan by Satan's demonic power, using instead the self-sacrificing power of the cross. Building his chapters around citations from Jacques Ellul, Walter Brueggemann, Ched Myers, René Girard, Noam Chomsky, William Stringfellow and Walter Wink, his social critique is wide-ranging.

The book is brutally honest. Dietrich acknowledges that his protest against the cardinal's new cathedral has to do in part with his own unresolved issues with authority. He does not romanticize the poor; they are "not nice," stealing batteries from the Workers' cars and goldfish from their dining-garden pond. He personalizes them, giving them names—Cheryl, the inveterate crack addict with H.I.V.; Ron, who threatens the Workers with an empty wine bottle; Mean Ed, a passionate despiser of white people; the angry Wheelchair Bob—and yet he finds always the humanity within them.

Much as I enjoyed reading this book, I found it deeply disturbing, entering into my prayer, challenging my own certitudes. Many will disagree with the Catholic Worker's anarchist approach to contemporary society. But it is deeply Catholic, rooted in the Gospel, centered on the works of mercy and the eucharistic meal, calling all Christians not just to worship Jesus but, in Dietrich's words, to practice him.

**THOMAS P. RAUSCH, S.J.**, is the T. Marie Chilton Professor of Catholic Theology at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, Calif.

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## STREET SIGNS

NIGHT OF THE REPUBLIC  
Poems

By Alan Shapiro  
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 80p \$21

Alan Shapiro, author of nine previous collections of poetry, two memoirs, a book of criticism and two classical translations, has published another volume of poems. *Night of the Republic* is accessible, engaging and playful, and if it does not probe deeply into dark questions, it enables us to see more clearly where those questions might be beneficially raised—namely, in the shops, industries and public venues where American life so often, and often unthinkingly, takes place.

It is a terrific idea. The dry cleaner, the race track, the post office, a shed—poem by poem the “public” of the republic is inventoried and detailed. The effect of the book is to awaken us to our surroundings (especially urban surroundings), to achieve new and informed awareness of where we are and what we are doing in our daily lives. To read this collection is to acquire greater consciousness.

Shapiro gathers his poems into four groups. The first focuses on mundane but iconic places, mostly during night-owl hours (these poems bring to mind the paintings of Edward Hopper); the second presents portraits of seemingly ordinary people; the third explores public spaces; and the last appears to approach, though perhaps not quite to be, autobiography. Parts I and III share the same title, which is the title of the book, I



imagine because both sections examine empty spaces at night.

The majority of the poems in *Night of the Republic* share a strategy: short lines lead us down the page, forming longer sentences, many with subordinate clauses.

Occasionally a poem may leave us breathless, or slightly dizzy, as if we’ve run a race to get to the end. Here, for example, is the opening of “Museum,” my favorite of the night poems:

*So much of once  
and now and soon  
is or will soon be  
caught here, framed and  
glased—  
free of the drifting air—  
and hung, so that  
the very halls  
that lead from room  
to room are rooms  
themselves that make room  
in little dim-lit alcoves  
all along them for what  
there wasn’t room for  
in the other rooms.*

Paradoxically, this torqued, or twisted, or waterspout syntax speeding toward the end obliges us to start over, to read the poem again, slowly, and take a closer look at phrasing. Occasionally, Shapiro carries the strategy a word or a few words longer than necessary, as if repetition will heighten the effect. I decided to think of these ornamental continuations as akin to grace notes in music.

Another memorable example is from “Amphitheater.” I’ve visited a few amphitheaters recently, but this poem made me think of them in a way that had not occurred to me before: as sites of gravitation.

*In the dream time  
of the molecular  
what persists as  
colonnade  
or stair is struggling  
blindly to hold  
back, hold  
in, what in it,  
of it, every  
moment wants  
to whirl away  
from what it is.*

The poet goes on to suggest that molecular gravity—this resistance to chaos, this essential integrity—is a kind of “keeping/ faith, a loyalty” and then quotes from Pindar’s fourth Pythian ode—presumably this quotation is Shapiro’s own translation—and the poem holds these referents together easily, even casually, but also in a way that offers enlightenment. By poem’s end, we feel as though we have heard Pindar himself reciting in an amphitheater.

In a move that seems to me collateral to the torqued syntax and repetition, Shapiro sometimes expresses positive statements in negative terms, heightening a sense of irony or dismay. In “Supermarket,” for example, “[T]he cover girl”...has “compassion for everyone/ who isn’t her”). Another example, from “Edenic Simile”:

*The way there wasn’t  
anything to cover up  
or hide from till  
they heard in the sudden  
leaf shiver  
and fret of gravel  
the Lord approaching....*

“Fret of gravel” is one of many spot-

on lines in the collection, though “black as night,” which is less wonderful, occurs twice in different poems. But even Homer....

Like Homer, Shapiro is much lauded. His awards and honors include

two from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Guggenheim, the O. B. Hardison Jr. Poetry Prize from the Folger Shakespeare Library, a Lila Wallace–Reader’s Digest Writer’s Award and an award in literature from

the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His first novel, *Broadway Baby*, was published in January.

**KELLY CHERRY** is the current Poet Laureate of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

## CLASSIFIED

### Positions

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Send to: Search Committee, c/o Rev. Michael G. Meany, Pastor, St. John Brebeuf Catholic Church, 8307 N. Harlem Ave, Niles, IL 60714; Ph: (847) 966-8145; or send e-mail to [frmeanysjb@yahoo.com](mailto:frmeanysjb@yahoo.com).

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## LETTERS

### Walk the Walk

Re “Engaging the Spirituals” (3/26) by Drew Christiansen, S.J.: Many of my students are among the “spirituals”—“recovering Catholics” who are exploring world religions as a source for understanding their own spirituality

It is not that the church is saying the wrong things or not speaking from the heart. If anything, my students find church teachings reasonable, even if they feel some doctrine is behind the times. The real problem is that Christians do not always practice what we preach. We teach a compelling vision of social justice and view of the human person, but then some of us hoard our possessions and earnings and mistreat “the least of these.” I can’t speak for all the spirituals, but I think my students want to see the Catholic Church put its money where its mouth is—not just when it comes to advocating for unborn people, but for the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick and the imprisoned. Lives of fidelity, justice and service will renew the church. I think this is the real chal-

lenge before us today.

NICHOLE M. FLORES

Waltham, Mass.

### The Elastic Church

Concerning the article by Drew Christiansen, S.J., “Engaging the Spirituals” (3/26): Thanks for recognizing that one size does not fit all. Certainly structure is necessary, but so is flexibility. The church needs to be elastic enough to stretch out and envelope all the different ways human beings can find that help them to relate to God in real, tangible, concrete and not artificial ways. Otherwise it’s not a universal church.

STEVE KILLIAN

Bettendorf, Iowa

### Climate Check

Concerning Elizabeth Groppe’s “Climate for Change” (3/26): More than 10 years ago, when I was living in Indiana, I worked with a consortium of religious organizations tasked with “getting the word about climate change” out to folks in the pews. It was the most challenging job I’ve ever had, and I’ve had some doozies! I was the featured speaker at a number of adult

education gatherings in both Catholic and Protestant churches, and at every meeting the overwhelming response to my presentation was “God told us in Genesis to ‘subdue’ the earth, and that means using it.”

Most of the folks I met at these events would not consider the possibility that humankind was even remotely responsible for the climate changes that were occurring, if indeed they were really occurring and were not just normal cyclical changes. The idea of our being stewards and protectors of the earth was new, radical and, frankly, mostly rejected by good people who believe in a good and generous God. What can we do?

KATHERINE DUCK

Austin, Tex.

### Catastrophic Complacency

Re Elizabeth Groppe’s “Climate for Change” (3/26): While the scientific community has become more certain of the seriousness of the problem, the American public has gone in the opposite direction, with only 40 percent thinking climate change is a problem. The problems of energy conservation, alternative energy infrastructure and population control have to be addressed. Otherwise global civilization will fall into a pit from which it may never recover.

We had a gift of cheap energy. Instead of using it to advance our civilization to a sustainable level, it has already been mostly wasted. Add to this the “Don’t worry, be happy” trance induced in the Reagan era, and it looks like we may not make it. It will take a dramatic turn in public opinion to prevent the coming catastrophic change in climate. Sit in a car on a sunny day and close the windows. That’s a basic approximation to what’s happening, and it’s no hoax.

STANLEY P. KOPACZ

East Stroudsburg, Pa.

### Blood on Their Hands

Re your editorial “Democracy and

## WITHOUT GUILE



“It’s not exactly the way I pictured it.”

CARTOON BY HARLEY SCHWADRON



Stability” (3/26): President Bashar al-Assad and his henchmen have so much blood on their hands that they are no longer concerned with saving Syria but only with saving their own hides.

As a world community governed by universal principals of fairness and empathy for our fellow man, we cannot avert our eyes from the crimes against humanity these monsters are committing. Assad has gone beyond the point of any return to civilized governance. He knows it and we know it. It is time, therefore, that we deal with him as the criminal he has become. We acted with resolve against a similar criminal in Libya, and we should now act with resolve against this one in Syria. Enough is enough. Once more, the world has to do what needs to be done.

GEORGE KAFANTARIS  
*Warren, Ohio*

### Keep It Civil

Re “Time to Cool Down” (3/26), by Thomas Massaro, S.J.: I think part of the problem many of us are having with one another is a difficulty accepting that there are times when people of faith, after a process of discernment, reach different conclusions about very important issues. This is where civility becomes important. In my view, the regular practice of civility allows us to engage in respectful dialogue with people of opposing views. In this process, we are able to get to know them and are less likely to demonize them. When we recognize the decency in others, even those with whom we do not agree, we are able at least to try to seek compromise in the areas where it is possible.

Although I am a yellow-dog Democrat, in college I interned for Senator Orrin Hatch. Until then, I had a very different view of Republicans and of Mormons. While I was on the Hill, I witnessed the deep friendship between Senator Hatch

and Senator Ted Kennedy, people of different faiths and backgrounds but both men of goodwill. They were able to hold often diametrically opposing views, while regularly working together on mutual projects for the good of our country. The bedrock of this process was simple civility, and I was glad I was able to witness it and learn from it so early in life.

DEB TRUITT  
*Oak Harbor, Wash.*

### Essential Arguments

The problem with the suggestions of Thomas Massaro, S.J., in “Time to Cool Down” (3/26) is that abortion and contraception are essentials. There is no nuance there. The popes are very clear that we have liberty in applying the church’s economic justice teachings and should be respectful of one another there. A person who is sincerely anti-abortion and anti-contraception, but liberal on economic issues, like the late, great governor of Pennsylvania, Robert Casey Sr., has my full respect, even if I disagree on nuances.

Father Massaro writes, however, as if it’s O.K. that Sandra Fluke supports government funding of birth control. It’s not. New York’s Cardinal Timothy Dolan and the U.S. bishops have been in dialogue with the Obama administration for months over this matter. If anything, the Obama administration has been duplicitous in giving the bishops the idea that their concerns were being taken seriously when they

obviously had no intention of addressing their concerns. If I recall correctly, Jesus had a few choice words for the Pharisees (e.g., “brood of vipers”), and then there is his cleansing of the temple. Perhaps our good Lord should have read Father Massaro’s article first to get a few tips on civility!

BOB HUNT  
*Knoxville, Tenn.*

### Church Boundaries

Concerning “Government’s Task” (Current Comment, 3/26): Health insurance is an earned benefit, part of the wage package received by employees in exchange for their labors. Thus, it makes as much sense for the bishops to withhold birth control coverage for employees as it would for the bishops to withhold that portion of their employees’ cash wages that might be spent on contraception.

The government is not interfering with the right of the church to be opposed to artificial birth control, but it does have the obligation to prevent the church from imposing its teachings on those who reject them.

JIM PALERMO  
*Southampton, Mass.*

### Grasping History

Re Maurice Timothy Reidy’s discussion of Rick Santorum’s comments about John Kennedy’s famous Houston speech (Of Many Things, 3/26): The circumstances were vastly different for the man who was to be the first Catholic president. A consor-

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tium of respected Protestant ministers (led by Norman Vincent Peale) voiced objection to the possibility of a Catholic president on the grounds that his primary loyalty would be to Rome. Today, we have legal abortion, a Catholic vice president and the very Protestants who once believed Catholics harbored guns in their churches hoping for a violent takeover of the United States now support pro-life Catholics.

Most surprising of all is that Santorum is only one of the Catholics running today (and that the other one is the thrice-married Newt Gingrich), not to mention that the leading Republican contender is a Mormon. All of these candidates face a sitting

African-American president. No one in the 1960s could have imagined such a future. It seems Rick Santorum has little grasp of this history or of the anti-Catholicism Kennedy faced in his era.

CAROL DECHANT  
*Ocean Ridge, Fla.*

### Power Broken

Concerning "Afghanistan Burning" (Current Comment, 3/19): It is a shame on our country that the only nations that we will "save for democracy" are those that either supply us with cheap raw materials or are of strategic military value. If we were honestly interested in promoting justice and peace, we would be involved in

addressing the slaughter of innocent people in a place like Syria.

Wealth and power are the priorities of our country. The only parts of the Christian Gospels that address those priorities relate to the Sanhedrin and the Roman governor. Like those power brokers, we seem to support the vocation of the money changers in the Temple. Jesus physically expelled them, for which, like so many young soldiers of ours today, he died a few days later, because the powers that be wanted to protect their self-serving status quo.

LARRY BOUDREAU  
*San Antonio, Tex.*

### The Letter of the Law

Your editorial "N.Y.P.D. Blues" (3/19), focusing on intelligence gathering by the N.Y. Police Department in this post-9/11 world, is right on target. As someone who spent a career protecting U.S. embassies abroad and then directing the public safety efforts in one of New York City's major business improvement districts, I fully understand the need for timely and clear intelligence. Following the letter, and more importantly, the spirit of the law, however, is essential in a free and open society.

Having worked with N.Y.P.D.'s best, I know their hearts are in the right place strategizing defenses in the protection of New York and its wonderful people. N.Y. Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly and N.Y.P.D. Intelligence Chief David Cohen need to find ways to include a diverse number of community and policy leaders in their strategic discussions as they strive to prevent another 9/11.

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# Demanding but Constant Love

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER (B), APRIL 22, 2012

Readings: Acts 3:13-19; Ps 4:2-9; 1 Jn 2:1-5; Lk 24:35-48

*Whoever keeps his word, the love of God is perfected in him (1 Jn 2:5)*

The First Letter of John is both particularly inspiring and particularly disjointed, bouncing around as it does from one statement to another with little cohesion. Today's short reading is a perfect illustration of this dual character. The reading brings us through a quick succession of ideas. First we are told that if we sin, then we have "an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one." Then we read that whoever "does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not found in him." Finally we learn that "whoever keeps his word, the Love of God is truly perfected in him."

If I were reading a student paper and encountered these three successive points within such a short span of text, I might write something like the following in the margin: "John, slow down here. Write an explanatory paragraph for each claim, and be sure to tell the reader how they all go together."

It seems that John is going to require us to do this for ourselves. We should start by recognizing that the letter's central theme is love. This is also true of the Gospel of John, the letter's theological foundation: "As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (Jn 13:34). To love as Jesus loves is no easy task. As Fyodor Dostoyevsky famously articulated in *The Brother's Karamazov*, "Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams." Love

demands; it demands utterly. Mere obedience requires a bit of discipline. Love requires that we call forth the very truth about us: we are made for love. For this very reason, love is also utterly beautiful and transcendent. Only in loving do I experience and express my true wealth.

So keeping God's word is nothing less than both expressing our love for God and experiencing God's very love being perfected in us. We become expressions of the living love of God. To fail to follow God's commandments is to deny both our deepest truth and the truth of God within us.

The commandments of God are, on one level, various, ranging from basic honesty to fulfilling the imperatives of justice. On another level, they are simply expressions of the singular command of love: Love fulfills the law (Rom 13:8). This should not surprise us, since "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). Where there is no love, there is simply no God; and no matter how well-behaved we are, there is no truth in us.

Love is difficult and demanding precisely because it calls on our deepest selves. Wholly genuine love allows for no half-measures. So, until God's love is perfected in us, we are going to fail again and again and again.

If I focused on my failures, I would be utterly deflated. Today's reading begins with words of comfort: "We have

an Advocate with the Father." Do not think this means that Jesus is pleading our cause with the Father, for John ties this to Jesus' sacrifice. I take this to mean that his self-emptying gift for us to the Father is an eternal redemptive expression of his love, perpetually uniting us to the Father. His very redemptive gift is an eternal advocacy on our behalf. This means that he is constantly offering us his mercy even



## PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- Consider the ways you are best at loving.
- Where is loving most "dreadful" in your life?
- What does God ask of you there?

as his love is constantly calling us to live our souls' deepest truth.

For me, the most heroic life is not the one with the grand gesture; it is the one that is most constant in love. This is why, for example, Pope John Paul II declared St. Thérèse of Lisieux a doctor of the church. Her "little way" is both simple and profound. As she framed it in her *Story of a Soul*: "This is how my life will be consumed. I have no other means of proving my love for you than that of strewing flowers, that is, not allowing one little sacrifice to escape, not one look, one word, profiting all by the smallest things and doing them through love."

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# Where You Belong

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (B), APRIL 29, 2012

Readings: Acts 4:8-12; Ps 118:1-29; 1 Jn 3:1-2; Jn 10:11-18

*"I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me" (Jn 10:14)*

Many years ago I had a conversation with a man whose wife had just been buried. He had led a rather dysfunctional life and perpetrated much abuse on his spouse and children. He asked me what I thought of his chances of going to heaven. This was not a great question, since our salvation is not a matter of odds, but rather the assurance of faith in Jesus Christ who has already won this for us. Obviously, salvation is not a lock, as if our cooperation with God's saving grace is not necessary. It is! But odds are not part of the picture.

I decided to base my reply on some sense of how he conceived of the situation. "Have you reformed your moral life?" His response was, "Well, you know.... I guess that's a hard one. I still have some anger issues and now and then some alcohol concerns." I asked him, "Are you engaged in the church?"

His response: "No. Apart from the funeral, I haven't been to church in 30 years [that is, since the late 1950s]. I can't stand all these changes." "But you left the church before they came in," I said. "I know! This sure as hell isn't the church I left 30 years ago." (True conversation, I swear.)

I kept going: "Do you at least pray?"

He pondered: "Not so much like I suppose I should."

I encouraged him to go to confession and tell all. I gently urged him to make the rest of his life one of amends. I suggested to him how important it was to return to the church and to start a prayer life. But inside my head I was wondering: "Why do you even want to go to heaven if you're not interested in God? Heaven is all God all the time!"

In the second reading we hear, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." This will be heaven: being like God. Peter frames the fulfillment of God's promises by saying that we "may come to share in the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4). The church has called this *theosis*, or divinization, which refers to living God's life by grace as God lives it, particularly loving as God loves.

If this seems a bit too heavy or a bit too abstract, we would do well to consider the Gospel. Jesus tells his listeners that he is the good shepherd. Unlike uncaring shepherds, who leave the sheep in time of danger, this good

shepherd will protect us even with his very life. The theme of shepherding is much used throughout the Old Testament. Ezekiel 34 is the classic passage in which the prophet excoriates the bad shepherds (leaders) who exploit their sheep (the people of Israel) without care. Ezekiel prophesies that God himself will personally pasture the sheep as well as place before them a new David, who "shall feed them and be their shepherd" (34:15, 23). Jesus most assuredly fulfills this prophecy on both scores.

Jesus has come to feed us, to protect us, to guide us and to love us. What is particularly touching is that twice Jesus assures his listeners that he and his disciples (shepherd and sheep) have an intimate relationship: "I know mine and mine know me," and "they will hear my voice." There is great ten-

## PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- Take time to consider how the Good Shepherd calls you by name.
- How has Jesus guided you this past week?
- On what occasions do you feel most intimate with him?

derness in Jesus' image. In coming to know him and letting him know us, we come to develop a deep bond.

When I was in college, I was given a pamphlet that began by asking me what I would say at the gates of heaven when asked why I should be admitted. The definitive answer was, "Because Jesus died for my sins" (you cannot go wrong with that). Today's Gospel answer would be, "Because I belong there." So maybe I should have asked that cantankerous old man who wanted to know his odds of going to heaven: "Do you belong there?"

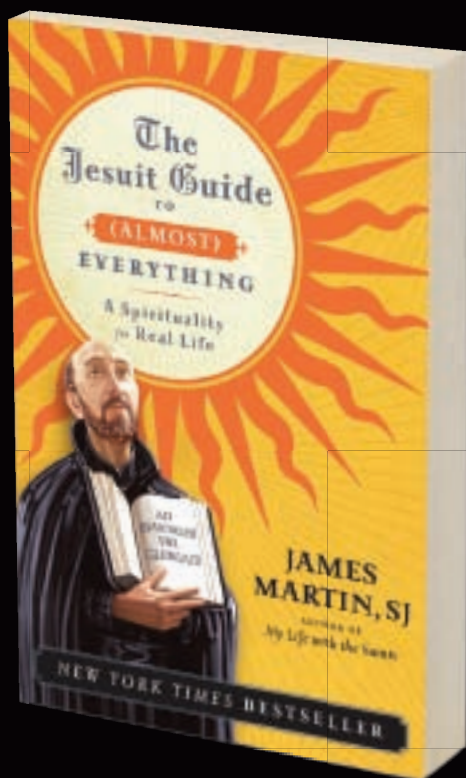
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