

# America



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## Catholic Tradition and the Health Care Debate

MICHAEL D. PLACE

# OF MANY THINGS

**W**hen I told a friend that Drew Christiansen, S.J., asked if I would be the magazine's new "culture editor," he smiled. "Will that mean you'll have to wear an ascot and a monocle, go to the opera every night and change your name to something like Osgood St. John Montcreif?" I checked with Father Christiansen, who assured me it did not.

What it does mean is furnishing weekly articles on a variety of topics, as part of the magazine's redesign. Avid readers now know to check the new "Books & Culture" section not simply for fine book reviews presided over by our literary editor, Patricia A. Kossmann, but also for pieces on film, theater, television, fine arts, music, architecture, as well as two other loosely defined areas: "new media," which looks mainly at Web-based media, and "ideas," which addresses the intersection between culture and faith.

Part of the fun of editing the new culture section has been gathering a stable of talented writers. Starting out, we did not have far to look. One of our most popular writers is Richard A. Blake, S.J., the film studies professor at Boston College. He is still faithfully penning movie reviews for us, like our last issue's look at "Public Enemies." But he has now been joined by Richard Leonard, S.J., and Michael V. Tueth, S.J., scholars of film and communications who work, respectively, in Australia and New York. Leo J. O'Donovan, S.J., emeritus president of Georgetown University, has been handling many fine arts reviews; and the Revs. Robert Barron and Robert E. Lauder, two well-known Catholic writers on the arts, have been tackling "ideas."

Too many priests and Jesuits, you say? Not so fast. One of our new theater reviewers, Rob Weinert-Kendt, who considered the Pulitzer Prize-winning play "Ruined" a few weeks ago, is a professional theater critic who has appeared

in *The New York Times* and writes a blog called "The Wicked Stage." And our literary assistant, Regina Nigro, has already contributed her youthful voice to TV reviews, having zeroed in on "How I Met Your Mother" and, coming soon, "Saving Grace."

We are planning to balance "thought" pieces—like this week's article by Father Leonard on Jesus and superheroes—with outright reviews. (Father Leonard's doctoral thesis, by the way, was on mysticism in the films of the Australian director Peter Weir.) We want to surprise you, too. In the early fall, for example, you will read a conversation with Liv Ullmann about faith. (I just ruined the surprise.) And we'll offer writers from beyond the boundaries of "Catholic Land." Recently, Joyce Polistena, a world-class art historian, argued that the painter Eugène Delacroix, so long seen as "secular," was deeply religious.

But there is more to the culture section than what you see in print. Using our Web site, we can not only provide more culture pieces overall (they're usually posted on Fridays) but make them more timely. Sometimes a review of a new film arrives too late to run in *America's* print edition. So we'll direct you to the Web. And some clever "Web only" material, like the slide shows produced by our online editor, Tim Reidy, adds greatly to a review of an art exhibition.

Why have any of this? Because the arts are not only part of the human experience, and of an engagement with the modern world, but are also a primary way of experiencing God. What would our faith be without Giotto, without the Book of Kells, without Chartres, without the play "A Man for All Seasons," without the film "Dead Man Walking," without, well...culture? Immeasurably poorer. We hope to celebrate that spirit in *America's* culture section. But without an ascot or a monocle. **JAMES MARTIN, S.J.**

# America

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*Cover:* Two-year-old Nora Sample, who suffers from a genetic disorder, is massaged by the therapist Julia Alaimo at the Sisters of St. Joseph Daystar foster care program in Pittsford, N.Y. Photo: CNS photo by Karin von Voigtlander, Catholic Courier.

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### Lights Out

Like many other corporations, General Electric saw its second-quarter earnings plummet this year. Net income fell 47 percent to \$2.9 billion, down from \$5.4 billion a year ago. But there is a story buried within those cold numbers that sheds light on the parlous condition of the U.S. economy. One of the main reasons for the earnings decline is the poor performance of G.E.'s formerly profitable financial services arm, G.E. Capital. That division saw its earnings fall by a staggering 80 percent, from \$2.9 billion last year to just \$590 million.

You didn't know G.E. was in the financial services business? Well, beginning in the 1980s the company long admired for its reliable light bulbs and toasters began to jettison those traditional businesses in favor of something more profitable—financial instruments. In 1984 the company sold its small appliance division to Black & Decker. (That explains where your G.E. irons went.) Last year it announced it would soon spin off, of all things, lighting, which may mean the end of the familiar G.E. light bulb. Where has the company focused its hopes? G.E. Capital, which originally helped homeowners finance purchases of refrigerators, but moved into arenas like real estate finance. It became the company's leading profit center and one of the largest "non-bank" financial institutions in the world. Then came the crash.

G.E. mirrors the American economy, which has been moving away from "old-fashioned" businesses like manufacturing into high finance. Perhaps it is time to remember the value of actually "bringing good things to life" rather than simply speculating on them.

### Imbalance of Power?

As Congress works out its proposals for health care reform, the spotlight has focused on the powerful Senate Finance Committee. If the committee agrees on a bill, its six members—three Republicans and three Democrats—would offer the promise of significant bipartisan support. The power of this committee is especially striking when one looks at the population of the states the members represent. Wyoming (532,668), North Dakota (641,481) and Montana (967,440) are among the smallest in the nation; and Maine (1.3 million), New Mexico (1.9 million) and Iowa (3 million) are not much bigger. In total, these six senators represent fewer than eight million people, less than the population of New York City. Yet they weigh in heavily on the future health care of all Americans, not just

for the 46 million uninsured or for the "other 46 million" who are on Medicare. The latter figure is expected to rise rapidly over the next two decades.

One could regard this committee's position as a problem of immense disproportion, an imbalance of power that should somehow be checked. (Indeed, the House of Representatives, which is the structural check on Senate power, has proposed two bills of its own.) Or one could view it idealistically, as an example of the genius of our founding fathers, who expected senators to govern with their own states in mind, which, when tempered by the House, would lead to the public good.

Given its scope, health care reform is an authentic test of how well our government works, or does not work. Still, another "check" must be considered when speaking of government: the people's voice. In the national health care debate so far, this voice has only begun to be heard.

### Time Cycling

Lance Armstrong's bid for an eighth Tour de France victory came to an end in Paris last month as he placed third in cycling's storied event. The 37-year-old Texan did manage to make it to the podium, however, placing third to two younger rivals, including his Spanish teammate, Alberto Contador, who finished first for the second time. Armstrong was the second oldest cyclist to place at the tour, and his age granted him an underdog status he did not enjoy during his record-setting string of seven victories. Back then, he endured verbal assaults and worse from French spectators who suspected he was doping. This time around, the French largely greeted him with cheers, and the usually stoic Armstrong seemed to enjoy the attention.

Armstrong left cycling in 2005 at the top of the sport, following the model of Sandy Koufax and other athletes who preferred to end their careers early rather than allow the public to watch age dull their brilliance. The urge to compete lured Armstrong back, though surely the money helped too. In the days before the race, it was easy to be convinced that he would don the victor's yellow jersey once again, even if he was still recovering from a collarbone injury. In the end he failed, yet there was something just as satisfying about watching him compete fiercely but finally be eclipsed in the critical moments. Like the 59-year-old golfer Tom Watson, who lost by one stroke at the British Open, Armstrong failed to complete the storyline that sportswriters longed to write, but that almost does not matter. He will return to France to compete again next year, and the story will begin again.

# Teilhard at Vespers



The church seems forever to be embracing those she once held in suspicion. Galileo Galilei, the Italian astronomer, is the most famous among them. But there are others, too, like Thomas Aquinas, Joan of Arc and Ignatius Loyola. The most recent candidate for rehabilitation is the Jesuit paleontologist, evolutionary philosopher and spiritual writer Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Vatican watchers have taken note of Pope Benedict XVI's appeal to Teilhard during an evening prayer service he celebrated July 24 in Aosta, Italy, as a sign of reappraisal of the priest and his thought. Citing Teilhard's "great vision," Pope Benedict urged that "we consecrate the world, so it may become a living host," a phrase reminiscent of the French Jesuit's eucharistic theology, in which all creation becomes an offering to God.

Teilhard articulated his vision during an expedition to the Ordos Desert of Inner Mongolia in 1923. Lacking the elements of unleavened bread and wine to celebrate Mass, he composed a poetic prayer, "Mass on the World" (published in *Hymn of the Universe*; Harper, 1961), offering the whole of creation in its evolutionary history as a host to God. Pope Benedict has previously praised the sense of cosmic liturgy in the Eastern church. His appeal to Teilhard adds the distinctive resonances of the Frenchman's vision: a cosmos evolved over time and increasingly known by scientific investigation; a spiritual process that comes to consciousness in humanity, a humanity whose spirituality is found in activity as well as passivity; and a humanity called not only to live in the world but also to transform it.

The pope's prayer in fact puts emphasis on our obligation to "transform the world." In adopting this theme, his thinking seems to have developed along the same trajectory as that of Pope John Paul II. After the Second Vatican Council, both expressed dismay at the optimistic, Teilhardian tone of the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," with its focus on the cosmic Christ and its affirmation of the transformative power of the resurrection in history. Then-Bishop Karol Wojtyla complained that Christ the redeemer had been eclipsed by Christ in glory. As Pope John Paul II, he revised his opinion in his encyclical *On Social Concern* (1987). Likewise, Pope Benedict has come to write increasingly of the transformation of the earth as a Christian vocation. He writes in *Charity in Truth*, for example, "Man's earthly activity, when

inspired and sustained by charity contributes to the building of the universal city of God, which is the goal of the history of the human family" (No. 7). The pope appears to acknowledge that the kind of sensibility Teilhard possessed belongs to the full flowering of our human nature. To an unexpected degree, he voices trust in the graced capacity of human beings to transform the world and in so doing make it a more fitting offering to God.

Like Teilhard, Pope Benedict reminds us that the world we transform by our labor, our learning and our ingenuity contributes to Christ's great offering of the world to God. The pope has pointed to an array of problems awaiting solution and transformation: the protection of human life and the environment, the expansion of the "responsibility to protect" to include provision of food and water for needy populations, and the creation of international structures to regulate speculation in financial markets and govern a global economy. Will American Catholics rise to the occasion, leading our fellow citizens to meet these challenges by taking new initiatives on behalf of the human family? Or will we allow ourselves to fall back, enthralled by the idols of self-aggrandizement and self-amusement that so captivate our culture?

Decline is our civilization's future if recovery from the global fiscal crisis returns to the consumerist pattern of the late 20th-century America. Consumption has its place in creating a floor of material well-being. But after a point it becomes debilitating to the soul and to society. The transformation of the world certainly involves the expansion of markets—not primarily among the affluent, however, but rather among the poor. Furthermore, human creativity needs to be directed by fuller aspirations than improvements in material welfare alone, because human beings are more and desire more: aesthetically, intellectually, athletically, ecologically, religiously. In whatever field we endeavor to transform the world—science, engineering, communications, business, the arts—we must aim at promoting sustainable, fully human development at rising levels of well-being for all and for everyone. At the end, when this transformation has reached its fullness, as Teilhard wrote, "the presence of Christ, which has been silently accruing in things, will suddenly be revealed—like a flash of light from pole to pole."

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# SIGNS OF THE TIMES

UNITED NATIONS

## The State's Duty to Protect: Enforcement in Question

A nation-state's duty to support and defend its population, known as the responsibility to protect, or R2P, was the subject of a debate at the United Nations General Assembly in July. The global body had already affirmed the concept of R2P at a meeting with almost 150 world leaders in 2005. R2P is invoked in order to prevent four major crimes—namely, genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. The July debate, the first on the subject at the United Nations since 2005, reflected the fact that not all member states agree on how to implement the three pillars that support it.

Pillars one and two have received overall support from U.N. member states. The first pillar underscores the responsibility of nation-states to protect their own people from violence that may arise from within, including prevention of both the crimes themselves and the incitement to crime. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda, with an estimated one million slain, stands out as the most horrific example in recent decades of a state's failure to fulfill this primary duty. Other tragedies like the Holocaust, the Khmer Rouge "killing fields" in Cambodia and the massacres in the former Yugoslavia also stand out as matters for shame.

The second pillar focuses on the responsibility of the international community to assist sovereign states that are struggling with impending violence within their borders, aiding them through capacity building and by establishing early-warning capabilities. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon noted in a report on July 21 to the General Assembly that "the world has underinvested in preventive capacities" and had "failed to notice looming mass murder" in Rwanda and elsewhere. Such failures reflect what he termed both a "paucity of will" and a "vicious cycle of...fingerprinting in the face of unfolding atrocities." The same failings have also contributed to the international community's failure to stop the present-day mass violence in Darfur, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia, the three most pressing unresolved conflicts.

**Controversial elements.** The third pillar of R2P is more controversial. If a country fails to protect its own people, and all subsequent peaceful attempts by the international community to assist a people fail, then the R2P principle permits the collective use of force under the authorization of the United Nations. Key issues revolve around who is using the force and upon what populations, and whether the use of force is proportionate and clearly prescribed by the R2P principle. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, president of the General Assembly, said on July 21 that recent events have engendered a "prevailing lack of trust among developing countries" regarding any use of force by the developed countries. He cited Gaza as an example of an inappropriate use of force by Israel, which inflicted numerous civilian deaths, deaths,

and which the international community did not oppose, thereby undermining the purpose of international law.

Similarly, the American academic Noam Chomsky pointed out, during a panel discussion before the General Assembly the same week, that Israel's use of superior force had the backing of the United States, thereby compounding the damage inflicted. He also pointed out that early warning signs of impending humanitarian disasters tend to be ignored when responding might interfere with profit motives. He cited eastern Congo as an even worse disaster than what is happening in Darfur, with Western corporations also "robbing" the region of valuable minerals. Western governments, Chomsky said, have done nothing to prevent this theft.



Displaced Sudanese family at a shelter in Darfur





**Sovereignty principle.** The very concept of R2P stems from a positive view of sovereignty as responsibility. But past events like those in Rwanda, as well as ongoing conflicts in Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia, show that this positive view of sovereignty is not shared by all. The three pillars of R2P are not thought to be of equal height, and what rests on top of them can therefore be unbalanced. The answer may well lie, as d'Escoto Brockmann said in his opening statement, in the creation of "a more just and equal world order, including in the economic and social sense, as well as a [reformed] Security Council." In the meantime more needs to be done to build trust and to recognize that pillar three may provide the only solution to some otherwise intractable situations. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it

in an open letter to the member states, "If a state cannot or will not prevent or end these crimes, then the international community must...take decisive action...by protecting vulnerable peoples when States are unwilling to do so."

Most would not deny that the R2P principle has been misused by powerful nation-states. Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, has said that it had been inappropriately used in conflicts like the largely American-led invasion of Iraq. But there have been some notable victories. In his report, the secretary general spoke approvingly of the way the international community's timely intervention in Kenya took place early enough to forestall further bloodshed after the disputed election of 2008.

As he put it, "If the international community acts early enough, the choice need not be a stark one between doing nothing and using force." Less than stark choices are now available, if the needed political will is brought to bear.

**GEORGE M. ANDERSON, S.J.,** is an associate editor of *America*.

#### HEALTH CARE DEBATE

## Catholic Leaders Denounce 'Distortions'

**A**s the House of Representatives headed out of Washington for a five-week summer recess, with the Senate soon

to follow, members of Congress were vowing to listen to their constituents' views on health care reform. What should the American Catholic public be telling their representatives and senators in light of Catholic social teaching? "We need health reform that respects the life and dignity of every person, from conception to natural death," said Carol Keehan, a member of the Daughters of Charity who is president and chief executive officer of the Catholic Health Association. "That means the unborn, it means the patient with multiple sclerosis, the patient with cancer, the young mother,



**Carol Keehan, D.C.**

the addicted, the mentally ill, the dying patient and the frail, frail elderly."

In an interview on Aug. 3, Sister Keehan decried the "deliberate distortions" about health care reform being circulated by "those who for whatever reason don't want health reform to succeed." The worst of the distortions, Keehan said, is that C.H.A. and Catholic Charities USA are "working at cross-purposes" with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on the abortion issue in health reform.

According to Sister Keehan, all three groups are sending a clear message that health reform must be “at least abortion-neutral” and must include conscience protections for health care professionals and institutions that do not want to participate in abortions or other morally objectionable medical procedures.

## Topics Identified for Apostolic Visitation

Orders of women religious in the United States will be asked to complete a comprehensive questionnaire that looks at six areas of religious life in preparation for a series of apostolic visits set to begin in January. Topics to be considered are outlined in a working document distributed on July 28 to 341 leaders of religious congregations of women. The topics are related to the life and operation of the orders: identity; governance; vocation promotion, admission and formation policies; spiritual life and common life; mission and ministry; and finances. Members of the orders are being asked to reflect on the working document. A separate questionnaire based on the working document will be distributed to superiors general on Sept. 1, marking the opening of the second phase of a comprehensive study of U.S. institutes of women religious. The study, ordered by the Vatican, was announced in January.

## Pope Deplores Killings in Pakistan

Pope Benedict XVI has deplored the killing of eight Christians in Pakistan by a Muslim mob and urged the minority Christian community not to be deterred by the attack. The Christians, including four women and a child, were either shot or burned alive on Aug. 1

## NEWS BRIEFS

• The highest court in Britain has ordered a clarification of the law on **assisted suicide** after hearing a plea from a multiple sclerosis sufferer who wanted to know if her husband would be prosecuted if he helped her to travel to a euthanasia clinic in Switzerland. More than



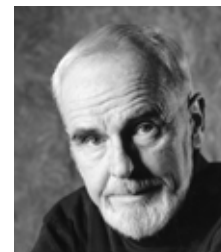
**Federal police patrol streets in Morelia, Mexico.**

100 British citizens have killed themselves in the clinic. • Seven Catholics who were detained after a violent police raid at a **disputed Vietnamese church site** will face criminal charges, a Vietnamese official announced July 28. The group was taken into custody on July 20 after trying to erect a cross at the ruins of a parish church that had been destroyed by U.S. bombers during the Vietnam War. The bishop's office of the Vinh Diocese immediately denounced the decision. • The Mexican Catholic bishops' conference has criticized federal police for **bursting into a Mass** in Mexico's western Michoacan State to apprehend an alleged drug-cartel lieutenant. “We make an energetic protest against the lack of respect and the violence,” the bishops said on Aug. 3. • Despite a personal request from Pope Benedict XVI and repeated requests by Christian leaders in Turkey, the Turkish government has decided that the **only church in Tarsus**, the city of St. Paul's birth, will remain a government museum. The Church of St. Paul, built as a Catholic church in the 1800s, was confiscated by the government in 1943.

when a crowd attacked the eastern Pakistani town of Gojra, setting fire to dozens of Christian homes. Authorities said tensions were running high in the area, fueled by a false rumor that a copy of the Koran, the sacred book of Islam, had been desecrated. A telegram sent in the pope's name said the pontiff was “deeply grieved to learn of the senseless attack” on the Christian community. Noting the “tragic deaths” and the immense destruction in the neighborhood, he sent condolences to

the families of the victims and expressed solidarity with the survivors. The telegram, sent to Bishop Joseph Coutts of Faisalabad, asked the bishop to “encourage the whole diocesan community, and all Christians in Pakistan, not to be deterred in their efforts to help build a society which, with a profound sense of trust in religious and human values, is marked by mutual respect among all its members.”

From CNS and other sources.



# Homework for Congress

Although President Obama had wanted a health care package delivered to him before the congressional recess, I think it was crucial that the House and Senate delayed their judgment. The health care crisis is central to both our economic troubles and our well-being as a national community. As the president said, “We want to do it right.” In addition to the daunting task of reading the proposed bills of both houses, our elected officers would be wise to spend part of their vacation doing some extra homework.

A good place to start is the Mayo Clinic, in Rochester, Minn., one of the more successful providers of quality care with excellent outcomes for patients at lower costs. After hearing the news stories claiming that the clinic did not support Obama’s health plan, it was a relief to find Mayo’s Ray Gibbons, M.D., an eminent cardiologist and strategist at the clinic’s Health Policy Center, talking about the health care crisis on C-Span on July 22.

In an eminently sane and fair discussion, something seldom seen on television or in Congress, Gibbons frequently affirmed that the Mayo Clinic supports Obama’s call for universal coverage. What the clinic, with a number of other prominent medical groups, wants to see in the bill is a reform of the payment system, which now rewards quantity of procedures (even if ineffective and sometimes unwarranted) and neglects quality.

The Mayo Clinic, along with 18 other health system organizations, sent

an open letter, titled “Getting Reform Right,” to members of Congress, applauding them and the president for their efforts to reform the system and noting that Medicare now “pays the most to ten states that often provide poorer outcomes, safety and service at higher cost and much less to most of the country, where providers demonstrate generally better outcomes, safety and service at lower cost.”

The present threat to Medicare and to our entire health system is caused by our fixation on quantity rather than value. The problem is that insurance companies want greater volume in profits, lawyers want greater rewards in lawsuits, patients want more procedures, and hospitals want a bigger census for beds occupied. If you make M.R.I. machines, the more you sell the better. If you provide costly M.R.I. technology at your hospital, you want it used. If you have lots of I.C.U. beds, you want them occupied. If these impulses prevail, the health care system, as well as our economy, will collapse.

On the C-Span program Dr. Gibbons, with an openness to which many politicians and ideologues seem averse, advised that all of us “will have to give something.” And yet taxpayers, the wealthy, the poor, the lawyers, the insurance companies and many health care providers appear to be unwilling to give up any of their demands for quantity.

Nonetheless, Dr. Gibbons does not see the situation as futile. Like the “Getting Reform Right” open letter, he

recommends that all of us, especially Congress, consider the Medicare Payment Improvement Act sponsored by Representative Ron Kind, Democrat of Wisconsin, and others. A summary of the bill, available on Kind’s Web site under the heading “Quality Affordable Health Care,” highlights not only the issues of coverage, choice and affordability with controlling costs but also the much overlooked issues of shared responsibility, prevention and

the key challenge for us to invest nationally in the education of health caregivers. The only addition I would make to this bill is a provision that protects institutions and taxpayers who cannot in conscience pay for or perform abortion and euthanasia.

One of the signers of the letter to Congress is the Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy and Clinical Practice. If you visit their Web site you will find, among other informative offerings, a brilliant five-page summary of the quantity-value problem. Titled “Health Care Spending, Quality and Outcomes,” it provides powerful evidence of the ineffectiveness and waste in the present health care system. Any serious reader should make a hard copy of this document and send it to one’s senators and representative. They have some homework to do.

If our legislators investigate the ways of reforming the payment system and challenging every vested interest—that is, the vested interests of us all—for the sake of the common good, their homework will have paid off for all.

‘We don’t want to just do it quickly, we want to do it right.’

Barack Obama  
July 29, 2009

JOHN F. KAVANAUGH, S.J., is a professor of philosophy at St. Louis University in St. Louis, Mo.

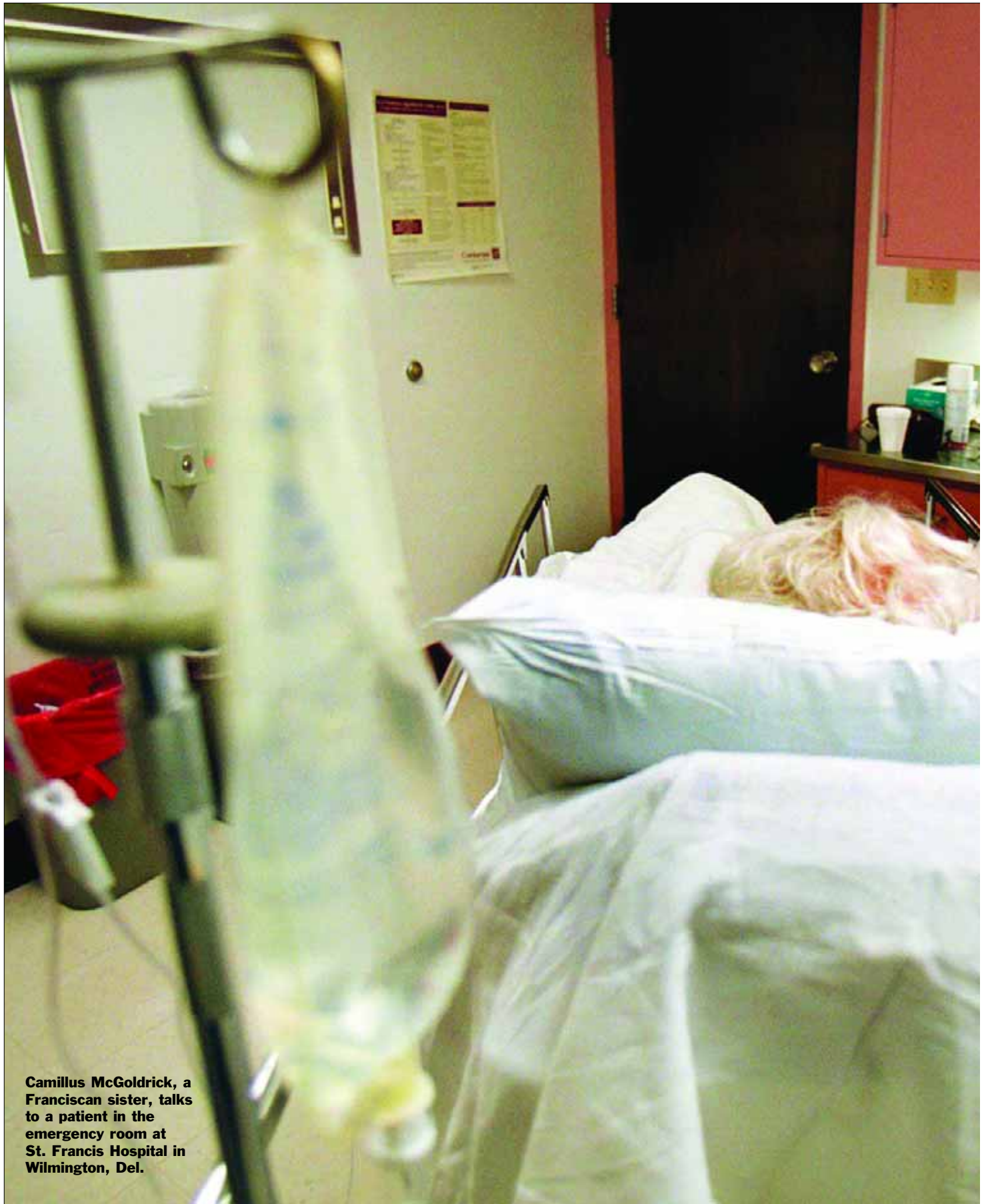


PHOTO: CANSIDON BLAKE, THE DIALOG

**Camillus McGoldrick, a Franciscan sister, talks to a patient in the emergency room at St. Francis Hospital in Wilmington, Del.**

HOW THE CATHOLIC TRADITION  
CAN SHAPE THE HEALTH CARE DEBATE

# A Time for Reform

BY MICHAEL D. PLACE

**A**ccording to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly 46 million Americans were without health insurance in 2007. Families U.S.A., a health care advocacy group, has estimated that over the course of 2007-8, 54 percent of Americans under age 65 were without health insurance at some point. Unpaid medical bills are a primary reason people file for bankruptcy. At the same time, the cost of health care coverage continues to escalate, with the average cost exceeding \$4,000 per year for a single person and \$10,000 for a family. Health care expenditures now constitute 17 percent of the gross domestic product. These realities have contributed to a growing consensus that now is the time for us as a nation to address the related health care questions of cost, coverage and quality.

For several reasons, I am cautiously optimistic that substantive legislation will be passed and signed this year. First, health care reform is a clear priority of the new presidential administration, which, consciously avoiding some of the mistakes of the past, is working collaboratively with Congress. Second, congressional leadership in both houses seems committed to overcoming the turf wars that contributed to the demise of the Clinton health care proposals. Third, interest groups whose conflicts helped derail the last reform attempt have been involved in discussion with both the administration and Congress. Various coalitions of these groups have even tried to draft consensus statements to guide future deliberations. Notably, the president of the association that sponsored the infamous “Harry and Louise” ads in the 1990s pledged at a White House summit to be a constructive participant in the reform discussions. Finally, and unfortunately, the growth of joblessness during the current recession has exacerbated and highlighted the problem of lack of coverage.

## Past Failures

Still, there are reasons for caution. First, we have been at this conversation

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for over 64 years; President Harry Truman called for “health security for all” in 1945. The momentum of history does not favor success. Second, when the 110th Congress began, there was near universal consensus that the State Children’s Health Insurance Program would be reauthorized and its coverage expanded. No one was against covering children. In fact, reauthorization did not happen in the 110th. Though it did occur in January, at the beginning of the new Congress, this failure shows how difficult it can be for our federal legislative process to translate aspirations into action. Third, the president is asking Congress to develop policies and programs that will provide coverage for all or nearly all Americans now and also to find a sustainable way of funding a reformed system. While theoretically this approach is preferable, many wonder whether the complexity of doing both will doom the entire effort; some question whether it would be better to take an incremental approach. Fourth, included under coverage, cost and quality are myriad distinct but interrelated issues that require attention and will not be easy to address effectively.

As an observer of political and legislative processes, I think cautious optimism is a reasonable perspective. But what if one changes the frame of analysis from the political to the ecclesial? Such a change radically alters my perspective; I turn from cautious optimism to deep concern. Why?

### **Catholic Concerns**

As a Catholic theologian, I was struck when President Obama recently began speaking of health care reform as a core element of an economic recovery program. While the president has spoken of expanding coverage in terms broader than containment of cost and a healthy economy, his use of an economic rationale for action is not surprising. Since the Reagan era, and most noticeably in the last administration, the public policy language of health care has shifted. Health care has come to be considered a commodity that should be subject to market forces. As an informed consumer, the patient should be entitled to the best product at the lowest cost. Competition will drive innovation and effective delivery. And the role of government is to be involved as little as possible, lest government impede market forces.

While that is a simplification of a complex series of social developments, it is fair to say that at the level of government and of some social theoreticians, the perspective has shifted significantly on the nature and role of health care in our society. That shift is increasingly at odds with the

Catholic social justice tradition.

In Catholic theology, access to health care is a fundamental social good, because health is essential to human flourishing and the preservation of human dignity; as such, health care is an aspect of the common good. Society and the state have a dual obligation to protect the right to health care and to provide the means necessary for its fulfillment.

Clearly this theological perspective is in tension with aspects of the current American ethos. Polling conducted several years ago by the Catholic Health Association of the United States indicated that Americans are uncomfortable speaking of health care as a “right.” Yet respondents did not consider it to be the same as any other “commodity.” For

those polled, health care was “special.”

Building on that insight, I proposed in the Brennan Lecture at Georgetown University in April, 1999, that we consider health care an essential building block for a free society, much like the

## **Access to health care is a fundamental social good, because health is essential to human flourishing and the preservation of human dignity.**

provision of public education or of police and fire protection, which are necessary for the well-being of society. The Catholic Health Association has outlined values and principles that can inform public discourse on the subject. Last year it published *Our Vision for U.S. Health Care*, which brings the richness of the Catholic tradition into dialogue with the American political and economic heritage.

While our Catholic social justice tradition has an internal coherency and the Catholic health care ministry in this country has a common voice, as a nation we do not have a similar consensus about the nature of health care and the terms of our social responsibility. Absent such consensus, we lack a framework for evaluating any forthcoming legislation. If our country were attacked, there would be overwhelming support for mounting a vigorous defense, even if that meant increasing the national debt, because we agree as a nation that collective security is essential to our well-being. We do not have a similar agreement about access to health care. Many argue that health care reform must be budget-neutral. But how do we know whether that is the best approach?

### **Resources Versus Rationing**

Concern about the increasing share of the G.D.P. consumed by health care is understandable, but how does one determine what is too much? As a nation we seem incapable of having an honest discussion about what Cardinal Joseph Bernardin once spoke of as “the allocation of scarce resources.” Theologically and practically, there are limits to

what government or society can or should do; it is a fiction to believe everyone can have access to everything they want or need with regard to health care. Attempts to address scarcity, however, are sidetracked by the way the conversation is framed, not in terms of the allocation of scarce resources but rather in terms of “the rationing” of health care. Because rationing is perceived as un-American, the public conversation ends at that point. But the scarcity of resources persists.

Without a national consensus, we make ad-hoc decisions with serious consequences. The uninsured are denied access to preventive health care, a primary physician or the full range of medical services and instead receive care in emergency rooms; Medicaid patients in one state have access to services not available in another state; providers who care for Medicare or Medicaid patients are not paid for the cost of providing services and so pass those costs on to patients who have insurance. We already ration health care; we just refuse to admit it.

While substantive, all these concerns do not preclude the possibility of good legislation being passed. But these concerns invite us as advocates for change to resist being trapped by the commonly used terminology of commodity and balanced budget. They also invite Catholics to become involved in the discussion of reform and to use the resources developed by the C.H.A. and others to raise the conversation to the level of principle: evaluating all that is proposed in light of social justice, with our first question being what any proposal will do to or for the poor and vulnerable.

## The Question of Abortion

There is a second reason for deep concern: Will the issue of abortion block reform? While there were many reasons the Clinton health care proposal failed before it came to a vote, the issue of abortion was very much in play. Pro-choice advocates insisted that if there were to be universal coverage, abortion must be a covered benefit. From a public policy perspective, the U.S. bishops were strongly supportive of universal coverage, but they opposed expanding access to abortion by making it a covered benefit. The bishops also feared that as a condition of participation in the new delivery system, Catholic health care institutions would be required to provide abortions. Finally, the bishops were opposed to Catholic taxpayers supporting government funding of an immoral activity. There were many attempts to work through this impasse. I was present in the White House when a final effort was made. After it failed, the bishops were among those who raised objections to the Clinton legislation.

The current effort might avoid such pitfalls. That being said, it is a matter of fact that the current administration and a majority of the House of Representatives are solidly


pro-choice. Will one or the other feel pressure (or commitment to principle) to use health care reform legislation to expand access to abortion? If they do, will they allow “conscience clause” protection for individuals and institutions morally opposed to abortion?

Though the president has demonstrated a commitment to common goals and an appreciation of the importance of religious discourse and values in advancing the well-being of society, it is not clear that his administration appreciates that for Catholics religion is not just a private matter. While our faith informs and guides our personal lives, it also guides us as faithful and responsible citizens. Opposition to abortion is like opposition to murder or slavery. Though at times there is disagreement among Catholics about the best way to advance this commitment in a pluralistic society, it would be a mistake for any policy maker to underestimate the Catholic commitment to the dignity of all human life.

Finally, the Catholic Church as a social institution—through its ministries of education, health care and social service—is an essential element of the public life of this nation. It is difficult to imagine that legislation could pass that would deny conscience protection to these ministries. But no one should doubt that if forced to make the choice, these institutions would leave the public square before they would abandon their commitment to life from conception to natural death.

## The Preferred Route

How do we proceed? We should avoid the pitfall of some who seem to refuse to engage in reasoned dialogue. Our position is nuanced and complex. Many Catholics, including Catholics in public office, do not appreciate the three-fold distinction: private practice, public voice and social institutional presence. We need to educate and inform our leaders about these and other Catholic principles. We must translate our faith commitments into language that can be understood in the public square. In a society increasingly influenced by 24-hour news cycles and shrill sound bites, we ought to provide a counterpoint of reasoned, respectful dialogue. A commitment to life does not replace the virtue of charity. The moment might come when moral outrage and prophetic witness are necessary. Until then, strength of conviction and participation in a political process that builds coalitions of support for the right cause are the preferred route. This requires that we reach out to others who share our perspective and that we work together as a church—laity, bishops and our Catholic ministries. Perceived internal divisions only diminish our effectiveness.

Cautious optimism and deep concern are reasons for us as a community of faith and as a nation to see these next months as a time of opportunity. The momentum of history is against us. But who says that history must repeat itself? 

# Obama's Long War

BY ALON BEN-MEIR

**T**he Obama administration is struggling to find a solution to the current upheaval in Afghanistan and Pakistan. After a successful military strategy in Afghanistan that overthrew the Taliban rule in 2002, the absence of a strong U.S. presence in the interim has allowed the insurgents to regroup in full force. The Obama administration is now pursuing a new strategy unveiled this spring, waging war in the tribal areas within Afghanistan itself and along the Pakistan border. The United States must realize early on that there is no shortcut in dealing with ruthless Taliban and Al Qaeda forces.

If the United States is not prepared to stay in the region for a generation, it must muster all the necessary resources now to pursue its objectives wholeheartedly. For success in this region cannot be achieved without rebuilding Afghanistan from the bottom up and aiding the Pakistan government and military in dealing with the danger its country is facing. Unless the infrastructure of the Taliban and Al Qaeda and their sanctuaries in Pakistan are destroyed, both the war in Afghanistan and the new and escalating chaos in Pakistan will persist.

President Obama's sending of 17,000 more American troops to Afghanistan is necessary to stem the rising tide of the insurgency, but their focus must be on training and strengthening the Afghan military and police. The current 80,000 troops that compose the Afghan National Army will probably need to be doubled within two or three years. To achieve this, more resources must be allocated for training and equipment while, at least initially, carrying out counterinsurgency efforts alongside the Afghan military. A focused campaign should be undertaken to woo the non-ideologue Afghan foot-soldiers fighting for money beside the Taliban insurgents, by offering them better-paying jobs within the new security apparatus, and co-opting some of the tribal leaders, who might switch sides for the right compensation. Although this idea has been afloat between the Afghan government and U.S. military for some time, no concerted effort has been made. Once potential "converts" are identified, U.S. military leaders should hand this task

over to Afghan and American civilians as part of reconstruction and rehabilitation.

## **Poppies and Afghan Farmers**

The United States also must end the farming and cultivation of poppies that subsidize the Taliban and Al Qaeda by offering farmers crop alternatives and subsidies. It is estimated that less than \$400 million could achieve this critically important objective. Without significant alternatives, the Taliban will not only continue to finance the insurgency, but maintain mutually beneficial relationships with thousands of destitute Afghan farmers and their families who have no other way to make a living. What is needed is a systematic engagement of Afghan farmers in sustainable farming projects fully subsidized by the United States, while the U.S. uses trained Afghan civilians to supervise such efforts under the protection of the U.S. military. There are no shortcuts. Spraying existing fields without first providing the farmers with alternate sources of living has only alienated farmers in the past. The farmers need a steady income and U.S. protection until the Taliban no longer threatens them.

Even more critical to the future stability of Afghanistan is a major focus on reconstruction, sorely neglected by the Bush administration. A nation torn by bloody conflicts and civil war for more than three decades must be healed from within. Afghans need to feel that their children will be educated, that health care is available and that their government can deliver other basic services and protection. Personal insecurity and a lack of human necessities can make even a Taliban regime preferable to chaos. The United States has no choice but to fund these projects adequately. Now that more than a \$1 trillion have been squandered in Iraq over the years, the Obama administration must find the few billions needed each year for this indispensable aspect of the war in Afghanistan.

The United States should guide the Afghans in the building of democratic institutions, especially the formation of national political parties that can produce leaders with national appeal. Economic assistance must also expand sustainable development projects that empower ordinary people, especially women, while fostering collective interest in maintaining the flow of new wealth these projects generate. Existing projects require increased security so that the successful models can grow. The Provincial Reconstruction

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British and American troops patrol in Afghanistan.



Teams, instrumental in protecting ground operations, should be expanded and further supported by NATO member states. Incorporating qualified and fully trained Afghans into the P.R.T.'s is essential to ensure their continued success.

Relentlessness should characterize the United States' efforts to involve its NATO allies directly. Many would resist deep involvement in a counterinsurgency war, but these reluctant NATO members must realize that the war against terrorism in Afghanistan and in Iraq has global implications. In the past few years Al Qaeda and other affiliated terrorist groups have repeatedly attacked Europe, not the United States. The Obama administration should focus on how NATO countries can contribute more.

The Turks, for example, have offered military and police training. Other nations could help train and equip the Afghan police and security. The Obama administration must encourage the United Nations to take the lead in securing donor nations to share in the building of Afghanistan. Over the years the United Nations has demonstrated that it is best suited for such tasks, provided that donor countries actually pay what they have pledged (which has not always been the case). The United States can strengthen the U.N.'s position as a clearinghouse and coordinator of all nonmilitary efforts in Afghanistan.

### What About Pakistan?

The solution for Pakistan is much more difficult, and it is here that the war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda will be won or lost. The focus of the war must now shift to the sanctuaries and terrorist safe havens along Pakistan's north-west border with Afghanistan. The Pakistani Taliban provides perfect shelter to Al Qaeda leaders, fuels the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan and destabilizes Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas. It is from this area that the leaders retool and plot their next attacks, which is why it has become a focal point for the U.S. military strategy.

The Obama administration must undertake several critical measures not taken by the previous administration and that led to a crisis of confidence between

Pakistan and the United States. The U.S. must make a supreme effort to improve its image there. The Bush legacy left most Pakistanis with a bitter distaste for American policy and outreach. This may be attributed to President Bush's unconditional support for the unpopular Musharraf, the rising toll of civilian casualties caused by drone attacks and a general distrust toward Americans, who might abandon Pakistan as they have twice before abandoned Afghanistan.

The United States should make it clear that the fight against the Taliban and Al Qaeda is as much a Pakistani war

#### ON THE WEB

A conversation  
with Alon Ben-Meir.  
[americamagazine.org/podcast](http://americamagazine.org/podcast)

as it is an American or Afghan war. When Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari agreed to allow the Taliban to institute Shariah law in the Swat region and the Taliban stormed into Bonier, Pakistanis were awakened to the increasing danger of the Taliban forces among them. President Obama must emphasize that unlike U.S. aid used against the Soviets in the cold war, or against the Taliban in 2002, this time the United States has the stamina to persevere for as long as it takes to create stability in the region. The powerful Pakistani army must take the lead with a determination to root out the Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters; currently the Pakistani army wields far more power and influence than the government. President Obama must clarify that in exchange for training, equipment and long-term U.S. support, the Pakistani army and the Inter-Services Intelligence must make the fight against the Taliban and Al Qaeda their top priority.

#### Four Prerequisites


The goal cannot be achieved, however, without putting in place four prerequisites. First, the Pakistani military must shift its focus from the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir to the Afghan-Pakistan border, as it has started to do. During the past seven years billions of dollars in U.S. military assistance to Pakistan was spent on weapons procurement and training against India. The United States should bolster efforts to reduce the tension between India and Pakistan, and disabuse Pakistan of the presumed imminent Indian threat. The United States should mediate between the two sides to find a peaceful solution to the Kashmir conflict. At a minimum, India and Pakistan can commit themselves to a nonbelligerent approach to the issue. The Pakistani public must support this shift, which would give the government latitude to focus on the internal and more ominous threat. The Obama administration should assure the Pakistani military intelligence elite that there is no U.S.-Indian-Afghan "conspiracy" designed to dismember the Pakistani state. Here, better cooperation between the C.I.A. and the I.S.I. would help to assuage such concerns while

dealing with the Taliban more effectively.

Second, the Obama administration must provide the Pakistani army with the necessary tools and equipment to wage a war against insurgency—a war the military is reluctant to fight and does not yet know how to execute. Scores of combat helicopters, night-vision devices and training are needed to battle an invisible foe. These should be part of the United States' increased military assistance. Training will take time, as will changing the mindset of the military forces. Meanwhile, the United States should insist quietly on an end to all collaboration between the Pakistani intelligence and terrorist groups. The Pakistani military and civilian authorities must realize that this war will not be won by half-hearted efforts, and that the fate of their own state is intertwined with peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Third, Pakistan and Afghanistan must fully collaborate in their fight against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, which requires improved relations between the two countries. The Obama administration's recent effort in Washington to improve the relationship between Afghan President Hamid Karzai and President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan is extremely important and should be pursued. Settling the border dispute between the two countries will help resolve their historic differences and will allow the Pakistani army to deal more effectively with border crossings by the Taliban fighters and with the smuggling of narcotics and weapons.


Fourth, U.S. concern over the safety of Pakistan's nuclear stockpile is genuine and justified. Although the Pakistani military offers assurances about its safety, the United States cannot take safety for granted. The danger of nuclear weapons or material falling into the hands of a terrorist group cannot readily be ruled out. Pakistan is extraordinarily sensitive about its nuclear weapons and suspects that the United States might have some design in mind to seize them. The Obama administration must work out an arrangement whereby the Pakistanis would feel safe and in control of their weapons, while the United States is satisfied that under no circumstances could such weapons or material fall into the wrong hands.


With the best of intentions and with all the efforts and resources needed to secure a peaceful ending to the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, there is still no assurance of success. President Obama's campaign has just begun, and this war may be his longest. The United States can leave the region successfully only when Afghanistan and Pakistan realize that they must fight the war against terror as their own. America must stand ready and willing to help them win it, with staying power this time around. 

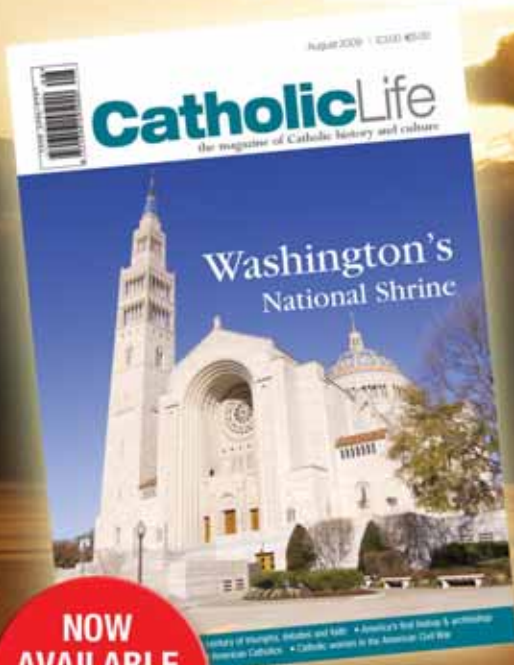
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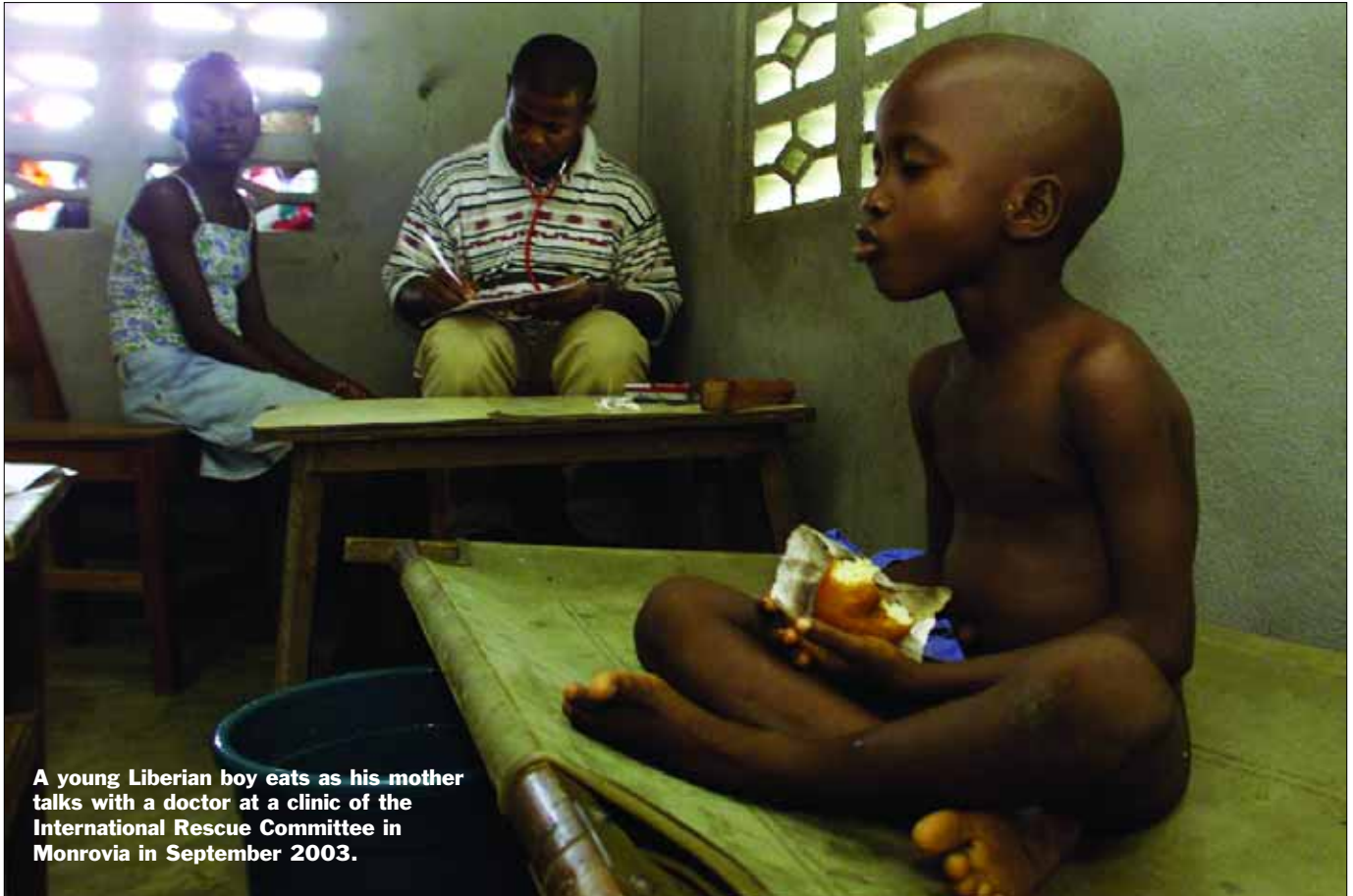
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# Demystifying Medicine

The tension between faith and science in West Africa

BY JOHN PERRY



A young Liberian boy eats as his mother talks with a doctor at a clinic of the International Rescue Committee in Monrovia in September 2003.

PHOTO: REUTERS/VASILY FEDOSENIKO

Georges Bernanos began his novel *The Diary of a Country Priest* with the words of the curate: "Mine is a parish like all the rest." While this characterization may have been accurate for a parish in rural France, it is not true here in Liberia. For the past eight months, as I have ministered to the faithful people of God in Holy Family Parish in Caldwell, outside of Monrovia, I have had a growing awareness that some of my faith judgments may not be the same as those of my parishioners, in part because I come from Canada and am not African.

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JOHN PERRY, S.J., an associate professor of religious studies at the University of Manitoba, Canada, is currently on study leave at Holy Family Parish in Monrovia, Liberia.

Last September, as I presided and preached on the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, the first reading from Nm 21:4-9 required careful handling. The striking image of a bronze serpent with healing power in the desert would resonate well, I thought, among the people, many of whom still carry fetishes or magical amulets to ward off negative powers, known here as juju. My worry, though, was that I might be understood as saying that the cross is simply another powerful and effective juju, which is not what I meant.

Around the same time I visited a seriously ill parishioner in the Catholic hospital in Monrovia. She was in a catatonic state from which she never recovered. The clinical diagnosis was meningitis, but many members of her family and some fellow parishioners believed the problem had to do

with her late twin brother, who had died the previous year. Since she was his twin, West African traditional beliefs called for her to be physically lifted up by family members after his death and passed over his corpse; then there would be a ritual bath for her. The purpose of the ritual was to counteract her twin brother's efforts to make her spirit join his in death. Since she had not done this, she sensed his spirit at night in her bedroom urging her to join him. How could I as her pastor respond to this, except to grieve with those who mourned for her after she died in the hospital, celebrate a prayerful funeral liturgy and do whatever I could to be of assistance to her children and husband?

### Modern Medicine and 'African Science'

For most of our Liberian parishioners, there are two ways of proceeding regarding health and illness. The first is decidedly "modern"; one seeks the best available treatment one can afford from the many clinics, pharmacies and health care professionals. The second level is "traditional"; it does not subscribe fully to the "germ theory" of illness. One group of traditionalists uses herbs and other natural remedies. Another insists that illness is caused by a spirit invoked by an enemy. The solution is to seek someone in touch with an even more powerful spirit, who calls forth that spirit to heal the one who is ill.

People say that a particular parishioner has gone to the "sick bush," which means to the witch doctor who is helping them get well. Liberian pragmatism precludes ruling out one level in favor of the other. Whenever modern medicine does not yield the hoped-for result, one turns to the second level, sometimes referred to as "African science."

Among the most feared participants in African science are "heartmen"—human vivisectionists who remove vital organs from unfortunate victims for the practice of juju. People are terrified of these "medical" practitioners and fear being associated with them. An effort by the Justice and Peace Committee of our parish at mediation in a rape case was derailed when someone referred to the rapist as a heartman; the meeting ended in acrimony.

Some priests and most of their lay assistants endorse a dual-track approach to medical problems. I know one priest who was involved in a serious and long-lasting conflict with a parishioner. Suddenly large abrasions appeared on his skin over his kidneys. They reminded him of tribal facial marks and caused him discomfort. Even more troubling was the way his genitals became enlarged. Upon hearing of the problem, his lay assistant introduced him to a practitioner of "reverse juju," who could cause physical harm to the perpetrator. Unwilling to retaliate in this way, the priest declined the offer and sought medical attention. None of the nurses or doctors he consulted attributed his problem to African science. After a thorough physical examination and various

tests, his physician spoke of an unidentifiable pathogen that was causing his trouble and prescribed a strong antibiotic, which eventually cleared up the condition.

Holy Family Parish may not be entirely typical of West Africa or even of Liberia. During the 14-year civil war that ended in 2003, the parish was occupied at different times by three rebel militias, which fought pitched battles with one another, with the armed forces of Liberia and with the West African peacekeepers known by the acronym Ecomog. Many parishioners became "internally displaced persons" or left Liberia as refugees. Others who stayed suffered various forms of trauma. Catholic pastoral care for them at the time was hit or miss, because for 11 years priests came only on Sundays, if they came at all. Out of ignorance or necessity, traditional beliefs and practices competed with Catholic ones.

Perhaps these topics will be discussed at the Synod for Africa in October 2009. One paragraph (No. 32) in the preparatory document for the synod states that "some false beliefs and practices from African cultures demand special attention" and mentions witchcraft and ancestral rites of widowhood as special concerns. The idea of Bernanos's curé, that one parish is like all others, still informs some official teaching in the church. This leaves country priests in Africa wondering what they should do with their people. It is my hope that frank discussion of African traditional beliefs will take place, perhaps behind closed doors, at the coming synod. **A**



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# Modern Man

Brilliant and temperamental, the Abbé Lamennais anticipated many of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

BY THOMAS C. KOHLER

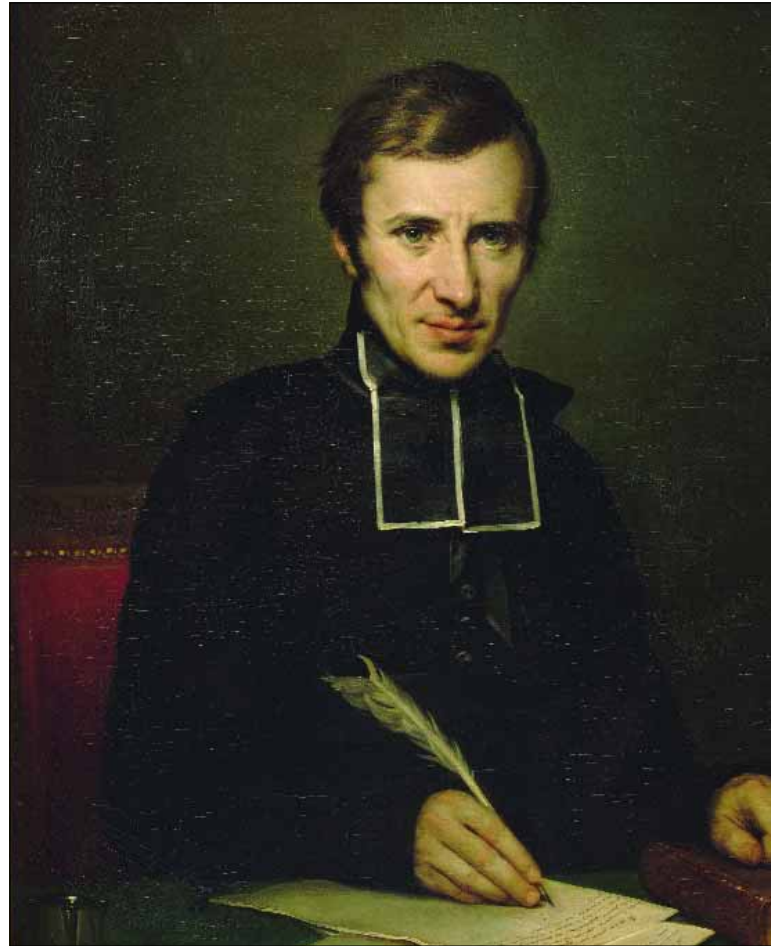
**T**he already elderly Pope John XXIII—elected only weeks earlier primarily to sit as a “placeholder” on the chair of Peter—startled the church and the world 50 years ago last January by announcing his intention to convene an ecumenical council. Since the moment of its announcement, heated quarrels over the advisability, meaning and fruits of the council have gone on unabated—a sort of Fifty Year (and counting) War—leaving many of us who have few memories or none at all of the Second Vatican Council to wonder how and why it all came about in the first place.

Major events typically have deep and tangled historical roots. John XXIII said that the idea for a council came suddenly to him, as a “heavenly inspiration,” and bloomed like a flower “in an unanticipated spring.” Of course he and the council fathers had predecessors who helped set the conditions for what would occur there. This anniversary year provides an occasion to remember one of them: Félicité Robert de Lamennais (1782-1854). Although he died over a century before the council took place (1962-65), Lamennais anticipated some of its most significant developments. Even now, his ideas and concerns have a remarkably modern ring to them. An acquaintance with his life and work may provide an appreciation for some of what the council addressed and why.

Largely unknown today, Lamennais played a larger than life role in the church and world of his time. Even the American press widely took note of his passing. “A notable death belongs to the French news,” reported Harper’s Magazine in the “Editor’s Easy Chair” section of its June 1854 edition. “It is that of the strange old man, the Abbé Lammenais [sic].” “He was a strange French compound of saint and sinner,” the editor continued a bit luridly, “being full of humanity” and “indulging in grand conceptions about faith and immortality, and yet (as we ordinarily use the language) irreligious and infidel; he was intensely intellectual, and yet, at times, in his long life, sensual—to a crime.”

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Little about Lamennais’s rigorous life betrays sensuality of any sort. Paradox, however, filled it. Prodigiously intelligent and hardworking, deeply principled and courageous, he also could be impatient, unyielding and, when convinced of the rightness of his views, tragically headstrong. If a prophetic voice possessed him, a prophetic personality afflicted him as well.

Despite this, Lamennais’s work and character drew a large and accomplished circle to him. Pope Leo XII (d. 1829) was said to have admired Lamennais so much that he kept a portrait of him in his chambers and considered raising him to the cardinalate. Lamennais’s circle included Dom

Prosper Guéranger (who refounded the Benedictine Abbey at Solesmes and reintroduced Gregorian Chant); Emmanuel d'Alzon (founder of the Augustinians of the Assumption); Jean-Baptiste Henri Lacordaire (the celebrated preacher and reorganizer of the Dominicans in France); as well as people like Franz Liszt, George Sand, Victor Hugo (who made his first confession to Lamennais) and Adam Mickiewicz (poet, Polish revolutionary and favorite of Pope John Paul II), to mention but a few. Like many contemporaries, Alexis de Tocqueville was well acquainted with his work.



Sixty years before the first social encyclical, Lamennais foresaw the responsibility the church would have in addressing problems of work, proper economic arrangements and the laboring poor.

### **Apostolate of the Pen**

Lamennais was born in 1782 at Saint-Malo, on the Brittany coast, just doors away from the house in which Chateaubriand had been born 14 years earlier. Lamennais's mother died when he was 5, after which an uncle took charge of his education by locking the boy in the uncle's well-stocked library and letting him read whatever suited him. Lamennais lost his early religious ardor, but with the guidance of his older brother, Jean, a priest, he returned to the faith and received his first Communion at the age of 22.

For the next several years, Lamennais taught mathematics at a college where Jean taught theology. There he

engaged in intensive studies under Jean's direction. After some indecision, Lamennais was ordained in 1816. Although he once promised himself to stop writing, as a means of suppressing pride, the intellectual apostolate formed the core of his life. His pen never lay far from his hand. Lamennais wrote what he personally experienced. Political revolution, religious persecution and social upheaval seared and suffused the experience of his times. The renewal of the church and civil society, developing the principle of solidarity, promoting authentic self-rule through subsidiarity and responding to social questions of the day represent key themes in Lamennais's work.

His 1817 work *Essay on Indifference in Matters of Religion*, catapulted Lamennais to fame. There he argues "without religion, no society." The declaration of self-sovereignty and the sufficiency of one's own reasoning abilities that lie at the heart of both Protestantism and modernity, he contends, corroded the basis of religious and temporal authority alike. The essay did more than present a head-on challenge to Cartesian skepticism and the Reformers' claims. Whatever its shortcomings, in the essay Lamennais also built a systematic argument for "absolute truth." In his view (later called "traditionalism"), truth reveals itself through general reason (*sensus communis*)—that is, in the ideas and understandings universally assented to by people through time. The communal basis of our knowledge supported Lamennais's arguments for our innate sociality.

Lamennais's strong ultramontanist views and his insistence on church-state separation put him at odds with much of the French hierarchy. Their Gallicanism posited that temporal authority limits papal primacy, and that a general council of bishops is superior to papal teaching authority. This, Lamennais argued, made the state the supreme judge of morals and belief and subjected the bishops to state control, while curbing the pope from carrying out his responsibility to act as the "defender of justice and the rights of humanity." Any alliance between church and state, he adamantly maintained, injured both while putting individuals at risk.

Renewal represented more than a matter of theory to Lamennais, who always joined his words with action. Convinced that renewal demanded new forms of priestly activity, he founded the Congregation of St. Peter, whose special task would be the analysis of the old and the building up of the new society. Training put an emphasis on communication with the culture. Studies included mastery of at least three languages, mathematics and the natural sciences and the writing of pieces for the popular press on contemporary issues. Seeing laymen as indispensable collaborators in any revitalization, Lamennais opened his house of studies to them. Earlier than perhaps anyone else, he understood that

HUGUES-FÉLICITÉ-ROBERT DE LAMENNAIS. BY PAULIN GUERIN. PHOTO: RÉUNION DES MUSÉES NATIONAUX/ART RESOURCE, NY

the hour of the laity truly had struck.

Lamennais's influence in the church reached its zenith with the founding in 1830 of the first daily Catholic newspaper, *L'Avenir* (The Future), which carried the programmatic motto "God and Liberty" on its masthead. In an early issue he summarized its doctrines: religious liberty, liberty of education ("the first liberty of the family...without which religious liberty has no point"), liberty of association, liberty of the press ("the most active instrument...to hasten the progress of general intelligence"), universal suffrage and the abolition of political centralization in favor of the "right to administer ourselves."

In a good example of his ability to foresee historical trends, Lamennais early recognized that a democratic future implied a multicultural future, and with it, the problems of social unity that association could reduce if not fully resolve. "Imagine," he wrote in one essay, "a house inhabited, in its different stories, by a Jew, a Muslim, a Protestant and a Catholic; certainly, their beliefs and their obligations are too opposed to make a true society among them." Nevertheless, out of "fear that fanatics not come to set ablaze the roof that covers them all," the inhabitants of this house should unite to prevent persecutions against any of them. Association goes beyond security. It "would create between them relations of benevolence" and promote peaceful "discussions of doctrine on the points that divide them. In any case, they will have lived and lived in peace."

In a remarkable essay, *What Catholicism Will Be in the New Society*, Lamennais made an urgent appeal for the reunification of science and religion. They constitute "two

modes of knowing" that are "united by a natural and indissoluble bond." The world stood waiting for a "Catholic science," a science yet to be created that would provide "a general system of explanation, a true philosophy conformed to the needs of the time" and "founded on the constitutive laws of intelligence." Sixty years before the first social encyclical, Lamennais also foresaw the responsibility the church would have in addressing problems of work, proper economic arrangements and the laboring poor. The "principle of association" among workers, he noted, would have an impor-

tant role here. An "immense career" also was opening for priests "called to serve in new ways" this new and rising class.

*L'Avenir* was a sensation, its articles translated and widely reprinted throughout Europe and even in the United States. The voice of a liberal Catholic movement, the newspaper championed the efforts of Catholics and liberals for Belgian independence, led a petition drive to gain French governmental support for Polish freedom and raised large sums for the relief of victims of the Irish famine.

### Opposition and Distance from Rome

Prophets rarely meet a happy end. While very influential, *L'Avenir* failed as a business enterprise and ceased publication in late 1831. Lamennais's hopes for papal approval of his liberal Catholicism were met by Gregory XVI's 1832 encyclical, *Mirari Vos*. It never mentions Lamennais by name, but it censured numerous doctrines announced in *L'Avenir*, including liberty of the press ("harmful and never sufficiently denounced"), liberty of conscience (an "absurd and erroneous proposition") and "associations and assemblages" that combine Catholics with members of other religions. It also termed "absurd and injurious" any notion that the church stood in need of "restoration and regeneration."

Gregory also condemned "the plans of those who desire vehemently to separate the Church from the state" and warned against "writings which attack the trust and submission due to princes;" through their influence, "the torches of treason are being lit everywhere." Citing Scripture and the example of the early Christians under Roman rule, Gregory admonished that "both divine and human laws cry out against those who strive by treason and sedition to drive the people from confidence in their princes and force them from their government."

Lamennais and his *L'Avenir* collaborators quickly made their submission to the pope, and Lamennais told friends and colleagues that in the future, he "would speak as a Frenchman and not as a Catholic." When rumors and reports called his intentions into question, an exhausted and dispirited Lamennais made a second, unqualified submission. With it, he announced that he would refrain from all priestly functions.

### ON THE WEB

From the archives,  
John Courtney Murray, S.J., on  
"The Church and the Council."  
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Considering himself free to write on temporal and political issues, in 1834 Lamennais published the pamphlet *Words of a Believer*. Apocalyptic in tone and image, the work decried political tyranny and the economic exploitation of the peasant and working classes. It called on the poor to organize, but also counseled respect for property and the rights of others, and reminded readers of the duty of charity.

The book was a spectacular hit—but not with the pope, who condemned it in his 1834 encyclical, *On the Errors of Lamennais* (*Singulari Nos*). The encyclical also marked the end of Lamennais's remarkable role in the life of the church. One contemporary mournfully wrote to him that in learning of the encyclical, "it seemed to me that I had heard the beating of the wings of a falling angel." Others described him as "Robespierre in a surplice" or as an "infidel."

Never excommunicated, Lamennais was never reconciled with the church. His departure, however, came incrementally. As late as 1836, the Archbishop of Paris was told that Lamennais still heard Mass.

For the remainder of his life, Lamennais remained active in publishing and in political affairs. In the wake of the Revolution of 1848, he and Alexis de Tocqueville were elected as delegates to the Constituent Assembly and appointed to write a draft of a proposed constitution. Lamennais submitted a draft whose preamble began, "In the name of God, in the presence of humanity in which all the people of the world are united in solidarity as members of the same body...." The suggestion that the drafters begin from the level of the communes, the level of government closest to the people—in accordance with the doctrines of *L'Avenir*—was supported by Tocqueville and others, but rejected by the majority. Sensitive as ever, Lamennais resigned, and Tocqueville could not convince him to return.

As he lay dying in late February 1854, Lamennais stoutly refused the last rites and was unwilling to have his confession heard. At his insistence, he was buried in a pauper's grave, without priest, ritual or a memorial of any kind. An admiring essay entitled, "An Hour With Lamennais," published in Putnam's Monthly Magazine shortly after his death, described Lamennais as "saddened but not subdued by disappointment."

The "what if" question surrounds the tragic life of Lamennais. Had he not been so temperamental, had Gregory XVI been better at scrutinizing the signs of the times, had the political situation the pope faced been less fraught..... However one might answer these hypotheticals, whatever one thinks of the parties involved, the issues that preoccupied Lamennais make clearer some of what lay behind John XXIII's apparently impetuous decision to call an ecumenical council and puts into perspective some of the matters the council fathers eventually addressed. 

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# 'I Love You For Hating Me'

A struggling believer encounters the divine.

BY BARBARA J. KOUBA

**A**s a sometimes mischievous teenager, I was never confused with Mother Teresa. Still, a relationship with God was at the core of my being. It began with parents who gave me a strong spiritual foundation meant to sustain my pilgrimage into eternity. Priests, nuns, siblings and baby-boomer friends reinforced this faith throughout my schooling in the Archdiocese of Chicago. An average kid, I lived an ordinary life. In the middle of my 17th year, I graduated from high school and embarked on a career in corporate America. God had blessed me with a great family, caring friends, outstanding health and a bright future.

By the autumn after graduation this Norman Rockwell harmony had disintegrated into an Edvard Munch scream, when painful and energy-zapping bruises spread from my forehead to my big toe. Invasive tests ruled out leukemia, but the diagnosis was grim: a rare blood disease, a distant cousin of hemophilia, spawned bursting blood vessels. Some patients experienced spontaneous remission; others died from internal hemorrhaging or kidney failure.

At first I managed to accept my own illness. But when I witnessed the senseless suffering and death of the

hospital ward's young patients, I sank. All patients under age 20 were put on the same ward, and terminal cases were the norm. In colorless rooms, I saw listless infants with immense needles sticking out of their tiny limbs and necks. Some babies' heads were the size of a light bulb; others were the size of a basketball. Hollow-eyed children had incurable cancers, birth defects or life-threatening injuries inflicted by abusers. Life-support machines pumped oxygen and fluids through a maze of tubes, yet many of the youngsters became shrunken wraiths. Normal child noises were replaced by mechanical ones. These gray-skinned little people were too ill and too drugged to talk, laugh or cry.

There were no Hail Marys, Our Fathers or Acts of Contrition for this. My rock-hard faith in God shattered into sand. What kind of God would allow innocents to suffer so much? Where was the just and loving God I personally knew and believed in all my life? A sense of betrayal, anger and rage consumed me like an out-of-control wildfire. My final prayer of 1971 summed it up: "I will not love you, God. You're a monstrous sadist."

After several hospitalizations and months of inactivity, my energy trickled back and the bruises faded. But tsunami waves of survivor's guilt swept me into a furious sea of darkness. Why should I live when so many children

would never walk through a prairie in springtime, sled down a snowy hill or play kick-the-can until the streetlights came on?

My hematologist consulted a psychiatrist. After one brief outpatient session, I was deemed depressed enough to spend the next few months in a psych ward. I went through a revolving door of psychiatric hospitalizations over the next several years, but each trip found me more deeply depressed.

The psychiatrist believed in drugs; five times a day I was given a paper cup full of pills. When I failed to improve, he increased the dosage. He hooked me up to an electroshock machine a couple of dozen times, but incinerating bolts of electricity failed to vaporize my haunting memories of sick babies. I was injected with high levels of insulin; these 20 induced comas had no therapeutic value.

I made feeble attempts to talk with my psychiatrist, a Freudian who revealed himself to be an embittered atheist. When I shared a few details of my spiritual breakdown, he scoffed at God's existence and proudly described being in lockstep with Karl Marx's belief that religion is the opiate of the masses. He spent hours of our sessions attacking Catholicism as a twisted religion whose clergy members berate believers into submission with unhealthy levels of guilt and superstition. My problems, however, were

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with God, not with the clergy, the Catholic Church or any religion. Rather than confide in the psychiatrist, I grew quiet and hopeless. Like an elevator with severed cables, my broken mind and spirit plunged until I crashed—not alive, yet not dead.

### The Encounter

One desperate evening, I asked a hospital staff member to lock me inside the Quiet Room—a tiny padded cell in the psychiatric unit. The room's thick padding provided me with a cocoon-like safety zone. Huddled in a corner, my knees pulled close to my chest, I was alone except for a vigilant orderly, who made his rounds every 15 minutes. Lights behind the small observation window illuminated his concerned face.

I was a ball of twisted pathology when an unexpected visitor flung open my spirit's bolted door, refusing to be ignored or rejected another moment.

"I love you. I am proud of you." The simple message was not delivered by the hospital orderly; nor was there a voice, a psychic sign or a Cecil B. DeMille production. But the communication encompassed my total being. It was God. The *modus operandi* was easily recognizable.

After a long pause, my nonverbal response was as subtle as a sledge hammer: "I hate you."

Without pause, God replied, "I love you for hating me."

I was incredulous.

"It is understandable."

"What's understandable?"

"That you blame me for all the suffering you witnessed."

"Only a monster would let innocent children suffer. I can't believe in a cruel, sadistic monster."

"That is why I love you."

My battered brain ached. My Irish

temper seethed. I needed clarification. "You agree that you're a monster?"

"I love you and am proud you would never believe in anyone you think could be cruel or sadistic. I want your suffering to end."

"Why me? Why not the others?"

"Why not you?"

"But so many die."

"Life is a series of dyings and risings. People accept this in nature, but sometimes fear death on a personal

tial part of your life. But you must find life's goodness again."

"How, God?"

"By looking within."

"No, I'm hollow inside. I did nothing to help those kids." It was the first time I had revealed my failures and limitations to myself.

"Once you find your goodness, you can use it to help others."

"How? How will I ever find it?"

"I will help, but only if you open the



ART: STEFANIE AUGUSTINE

level."

How quickly God got me to the core of things. "I don't fear death. I want death."

"It is not your time. I decide when it is time for souls to move on."

"Life has no purpose."

"It is when there is no purpose that you must find a new one."

My mind turned into a mental video camera stuck on play. No pause or stop button. Sick baby scenes replayed with endless looping. It felt as if an icy hand gripped my heart. My breathing became labored. I cried helpless tears. I heaved with years of bottled-up anguish.

"Like it or not, the past is an essen-

door and accept me. You have free will, so it is your choice." God's reaction was gentle but firm.

"But I'm still angry."

"Anger can be a positive emotion when it's transformed to do good."

"If you're God, why not give me an instant miracle?" I reasoned.

"Miracles abound. But you must stop self-destructing. Trust me. Then every day for the rest of your life you will find a gift from me to you."

Ever so timidly I opened my heart, mind and soul. Unconditional love, comfort and peace surrounded me from the inside out and the outside in.

Before I fell into a restorative sleep, God repeated the original message. "I

love you. I am proud of you.”

I refused to share this transformative experience with the atheist psychiatrist, yet even he noticed a definite change. Within a week, I was discharged from the hospital; within months, I stopped all prescription drugs and turned completely to God, the Master Healer.

### The Healing Process

Over time, I learned more about God. Sainly contemporary heroes, including Mother Teresa, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., and the Rev. Lawrence Jenko, modeled love, faith, conversion, forgiveness and a God-centered life. I met other virtuous people, like a psychiatric social worker who went out of her way to refer me to a parish church that needed a secretary. Few employers were willing to hire a recently released mental patient, but the young pastor at this parish, the Rev. A. Paul Reicher, did not hesitate.

For several years I worked part time with the pastor and the parish lay leaders, and part time with sisters from Catholic Charities. Together we helped to improve the lives of hundreds of hurting, destitute people. I began to understand Jesus’ message as a living Gospel. The most enjoyable part of the job was the 30 minutes I spent each school day monitoring the playground. Listening to children’s laughter and watching them run and play was a healing gift.

Buoyed by the piety and selflessness of the parish workers, I enlisted and served four years as a U.S. Army chaplain’s assistant, where I developed professional faith-based counseling and therapy techniques to serve fellow soldiers better. Then I earned a master’s degree in instructional technology and embarked on a new career as an assistive technology instructor and

practitioner. I combined both passions—service and technology—to bridge the “digital divide” for people with disabilities. While unable to heal fragile bodies, minds and spirits, I am able to help people focus on their own capabilities.

For me, healing has not been a linear process. I was reluctant when God reopened the door. Inch by inch it creaked, until it was wide enough for me to pass through to all that waited on the other side. Today 36 years worth of cumulative gifts are evidence of

### ON THE WEB

Emily Brennan reviews the film “Julie & Julia.” [americamagazine.org/culture](http://americamagazine.org/culture)

God’s love that resonates through me. The most extraordinary of God’s gifts emerge from ordinary relationships. Topping my list is my husband, David, a gentle and caring man who in 19 years of marriage has loved and accepted me in a way no one else has.

What about my anger? It’s still there. But rather than self-destructing, I channel my emotions constructively into organizations like the Special Olympics, St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital and Catholic Charities.

A byproduct of healing is maturity. God is no longer my scapegoat for life’s problems; instead, I find answers revealed through prayer, acceptance and interactions with others. Accepting death, especially a child’s death, is still a challenge, but I better understand the process of dying and rising as exemplified by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God’s complexity is daunting; God is probably not a person, place, gender, consciousness, time or anything else I can conceive. We humans will never understand the full nature of an infinitely omnipotent God. Yet I have grown to cherish the mystery. And I have been blessed for decades with nonstop gifts from this loving source of goodness. That is why I know with certitude that God is the grandest gift of all. Faith is my humble expression of gratitude. **A**

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# BOOKS & CULTURE

IDEAS | RICHARD LEONARD

## MORE THAN SUPER

*Searching for Christ in a comic book culture*

During a recent Q&A in a Catholic school, I asked the fourth-graders about their upcoming confirmation. One bright young lad said: "Jesus is so cool. He's better than Superman." No one in the class laughed or looked bemused at this suggestion. "I don't think so," I began, but before I could explain further, the young theologian excitedly interrupted. "No; you're right, Father," he said. "Jesus was human, so he is more like Batman or Iron Man, only better." Considering the circumstances, having Christ come out as the best of the superhero bunch should be counted as a win.

It should not surprise us that the superhero genre forms a theological paradigm within which the story of Jesus is understood. The films that make up the top 10 superhero category at the box office include: "The Dark Knight" (2008); "Spider Man II" (2004); "Batman Begins" (2005); "Iron Man" (2008); "X2: X-Men United" (2003); "Spider-Man" (2002); "X-Men" (2000); "Superman" (1978); "Batman" (1998) and "The Incredibles" (2004). "The Dark Knight" was the biggest box office film last year—\$231 million ahead of "Iron Man." Overall, this collection of films has grossed a staggering \$5.5 billion.

While these famous Western, white and male superheroes have hit the cinematic big time, many other characters fill out the generic canon, including the Fantastic Four, Wonder Woman, Ghost Rider, Catwoman, Hellboy, the Hulk, the Punisher and the Spirit.

There is only anecdotal evidence of my claim that these superheroes are forming young people's way of imagining Christ. Formal studies are yet to be

done. And while I believe that the superhero mythology affects boys more than girls, we know that this film genre is an equal-opportunity attraction, and so it must be influencing girls in important though different ways, even by continuing the sexist stereotype of the female victim in need of a male rescuer. Wonder Woman does not seem to have had the same impact as Batman.



Brandon Routh in "Superman Returns"

PHOTO: CNS/WARNER BROS.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that superheroes are a new phenomenon. Greek and Roman religions had pantheons of gods with superpowers, a pagan heritage to which current-day superheroes owe a huge debt. The premise of the superhero is founded in Greek philosophy, especially that of the good vigilante who restores moral justice. Aristotle said in his *Politics*, “There are men, so godlike, so exceptional, that they naturally, by right of their extraordinary gifts, transcend all moral judgment or constitutional control. There is no law which embraces men of that caliber: they are themselves law.”

Yet it was Victorian and Edwardian novels that gave birth to the present movement. Robin Hood and the Scarlet Pimpernel were among the earliest modern adventurers, followed by Zorro and Tarzan, to name but two. In the 1930s and 1940s, the three greatest modern superheroes were invented: the Shadow, Spider-Man and Superman.

Superheroes share a number of common traits. Apart from their special powers, several also have a secret weapon (like a lasso, webbing or a shield). Starting with an extraordinary birth narrative, they feel a personal vocation to achieve their destiny by defending the common good. Their real identity is often hidden, but in public they wear distinctive clothes and use a symbol as a calling card. Their profound moral codes see them pursue the guilty, though many innocent people are sacrificed in their quest to eliminate evil. Often they work as loners, have access to unknown funds, and their public reception can be mixed—from adoration to misunderstanding to repudiation. Here we can start to see some parallels with the Gospels.

Take what the most recent

Superman film has made of his legend in comparison to Jesus. Superman is stabbed in the side with Kryptonite; Jesus is stabbed with a spear. Superman, when dying in a hospital, vanishes from sight to live another day; it is not unlike Jesus’ empty tomb and post-Resurrection appearances.

#### ON THE WEB

Guerric DeBona, O.S.B., on the image of priests in the movies.  
[americamagazine.org/culture](http://americamagazine.org/culture)

Superman hovers above the earth in a cruciform pose; Jesus comes to earth and is lifted up on the cross. Superman

is cradled in his mother’s arms in a pose borrowed from Michelangelo’s “Pietà.” Superman is sometimes called “the people’s savior” by a police chief or a mayor; Jesus is “Savior of the World.” Superman is often shown bearing the weight of evil actions or their outcome on his shoulders. Indeed, in “Superman Returns” he carries the metal globe that sits atop the Daily Planet building. Jesus bore the burden of sin though his torture and death.

Both Superman and Jesus, moreover, were sent to our world by an all-powerful father to show us the light and save us from destruction. Both reveal their powers in miracles, but even death cannot contain them; they rise to continue their mission.

As Christians, we cannot claim these parallels just for ourselves. There is a strong case to be made that one of Superman’s creators, Jerry Siegel, saw him as a contemporary messianic figure. Superman’s father’s name, Kal-el, is a play on the Hebrew word for “voice of God.” In either case, it is no wonder that some secularized fourth-graders are confused about where and how Jesus fits into this pantheon.

So can we use the superhero genre to our advantage when speaking and teaching about Jesus? Perhaps.

First, it is important to keep underlining for young people that Jesus is not a fictional character. Tacitus, Pliny the Younger and Josephus, in texts

independent of the New Testament—somewhat contested though they may be—establish that Jesus of Nazareth was born, lived and was put to death.

Second, Jesus is not the “best of a good lot,” superhero or otherwise, for those who believe in him. Rather, Jesus is the definitive revelation of God for the world. As Christians we hold that to see Jesus in action is to see God in action. Therefore God, in and through Jesus Christ, is a departure from what had come before. There is no death, destruction, retribution or vengeance in Jesus. In its place he offers us healing, reconciliation, challenge, forgiveness, love and sacrifice as signs of the reign of God.

While one of Jesus’ titles in earliest Christianity was the Divine Magician, in the New Testament “sign faith” is the weakest of all faiths. “How blessed are those who have not seen but believe,” Jesus told St. Thomas. Signs draw attention to themselves, and people can end up believing in “the power,” but Jesus wanted people who saw the signs to experience the love of God and come to believe in the Father. To borrow one of the best lines from the recent film “Bruce Almighty,” “You want to see a miracle, son? Be the miracle.”

Jesus has at times has been pictured and spoken of as fighting with one arm tied behind his back in the cosmic battle between good and evil. But his special weapons are of another sort. In some early church writings we are told that the model Christian wears the belt of truth, the breastplate of justice, the sandals of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, God’s word. While Jesus’ weapons are portrayed as similar to those of other heroic crusaders, the immediate effects are of a different order. Captain America, eat your heart out!

Third, Jesus saves us from the forces of evil and destruction, but we are not passive in our salvation, as are the beneficiaries of the intervention of

the superheroes. While amazing grace is unearned and undeserved, it is not forced upon us. We can reject faith and hope and love. And we are not saved by Jesus the way Batman saves the citizens of Gotham City. Rather, we are invited to enjoy the saving love of God in an ongoing relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Despite the parallels between the literary device of Mark's "Messianic secret" in regard to Jesus and the secret identity of a host of superheroes, we followers of Jesus are called not to be secretive, but to be prudent. We have personal faith, but we are not private believers. We share in Christ's mission to the world.

One of the most important things the superhero genre helps adults to

grasp is this: In an increasingly visual culture, iconography matters. We should conduct an inventory of our homes, classrooms and churches to see that the images of Jesus we provide, not only for our young, are consonant with showing that (with due respect to St. Irenaeus) the glory of Jesus' divinity is revealed in his humanity fully alive. Jesus is the definitive hero whose superabundance of life should be so clear that he leaves the fictional competition in the shade. Reclaiming Jesus in that light might mean that the homespun robe will return as the coolest costume ever.

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**RICHARD LEONARD, S.J.**, is the director of the Australian Office of Catholic Film & Broadcasting and the author of *Movies That Matter: Reading Film Through the Lens of Faith* (Loyola Press).

about such a variegated community. Yet McCloskey is a diligent craftsman and that makes the book work, and makes *The Street Stops Here* a standout in the welter of educational wonkery.

The central characters of the story are the African-American principal, "a charismatic and complex visionary" named Orlando R. Gober, and the Irish-American president of Rice, Brother J. Matthew Walderman, a member of the Congregation of the Christian Brothers that founded the school in central Harlem in 1938. As with most schools run by religious orders, the role of lay people has expanded as the presence of priests and religious has diminished sharply. That transition is not without tensions, and the fraught relationship between the tall, athletic and impulsive Gober and the bald, thick-set Brother Walderman is told with unflinching honesty. "They get along by avoiding each other as much as possible," McCloskey writes early on. That Walderman granted McCloskey such uncensored access is a rare thing, and yet the portrayal here rewards that magnanimity.

Race is another central tension, one that is in many respects unique to inner-city Catholic schools like Rice, but one that can perhaps be more instructive for Catholics than traditionally homogeneous settings. Readers will (or should) cringe at times as racial issues are laid bare, and the stories of the students who pass

through Rice are not always feel-good, made-for-TV-movie fare. McCloskey also deals with the complex questions plaguing education in America, espe-

## BOOKS | DAVID GIBSON

# A WORKING MODEL

### THE STREET STOPS HERE

#### A Year at a Catholic High School in Harlem

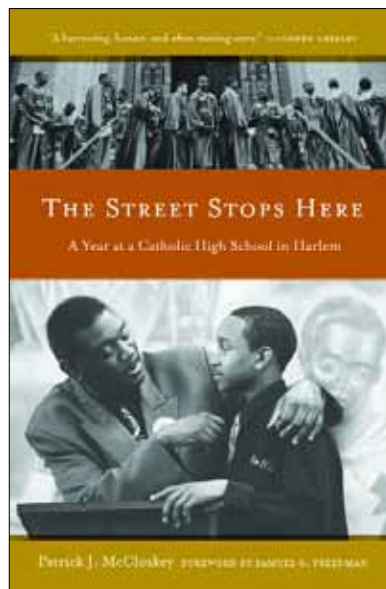
By Patrick J. McCloskey  
Univ. of California Press. 456p \$27.50  
ISBN 9780520255173

If you are looking for a convincing argument in support of voucher programs for Catholic schools, you could do no better than Patrick J. McCloskey's new book, *The Street Stops Here: A Year at a Catholic High School in Harlem*, a profile of New York City's all-boys Rice High School. Yet as the title indicates, the power of this work is not so much in its policy analysis—though McCloskey skillfully lays out the issues—but in the frank and moving narrative he unspools over the course of 400 richly detailed pages.

In the end, that narrative makes the case for Catholic schools, but does so almost obliquely, and because of that perhaps more convincingly than the

usual efforts. As the journalist and author Samuel G. Freedman writes in the foreword, this book is not "an advertising brochure" for Catholic schools, even though McCloskey is clearly a fan. Instead, as Freedman writes, "By admitting to imperfection...this book makes the most persuasive case possible for what Catholic education has achieved and how its example can help improve public education."

McCloskey does this by sticking to the story, or rather stories. The book is an omnibus of sorts, which as the author admits is part of the "unavoidable structural complexity" of writing



cially in poor urban areas: academics versus athletics, communicating religious values versus indoctrination, and balancing tough love with an understanding of the even tougher life that awaits the students when they leave school.

So what can this book tell us about the future of Catholic schools? Can they be saved? That is the question everyone in the church is asking today, and the one McCloskey set out to answer.

Born in Canada and educated in Catholic schools in Ottawa—which receive state funding with little fanfare—McCloskey was drawn to his subject by the furor over school vouchers in the United States. He also writes from the perspective of a father trying to find good schools for his own children, rejecting first a soulless public system in upscale New Jersey suburbs, then the mediocrity of public schooling in New York City, and finally settling on a private school in Brooklyn that provided a superb education but at a cost that entailed serious financial sacrifices.

Propelled by a desire to find out what works in education, and what could be improved and made affordable, he decided to make a “qualitative” study of a single school to see what lessons he could learn and then impart. *The Street Stops Here* is the result.

The book impressed me. As an adult convert to the church, I missed out on the classic parochial school experience—uniforms, Latin declensions, nuns both stern and encouraging and, above all, the chance to transform my miserable grade school years into a comedy routine or memoir of lament. Darn. But that lacuna has also left me, regrettably, with a certain indifference to the plight of Catholic education. I am not against Catholic schools by any stretch; rather, my parish life experience is one of churches and dioceses that struggle so mightily to keep their schools alive that they too often—or so it seems to me—sacrifice outreach pro-

grams for young adults and families who could encourage more youngsters to attend those schools.

McCloskey does not necessarily dispel all my biases, but he does something more profound: he forces me to face up to the challenge as well as the promise of Catholic education. There is much talk about shoring up “Catholic identity” these days, yet often lost in that navel-gazing is the axiom popular among Catholic educators who are forming young people with little or no connection to the church: “We’re here because we are Catholic,” they say, “not because they are.”

To be sure, Catholic schools and parents everywhere are getting squeezed by rising costs. But the decline in Catholic education is most poignant for urban areas where children, often African-Americans, des-

perately need good alternatives, and for Latino immigrants who cannot find the good and affordable Catholic education that previous generations enjoyed. Some four in 10 Catholic schools are still located in inner cities, but the trend is to close those and shift Catholic education to the suburbs where there are more Catholics who can afford a Catholic education.

It is a painful transition with no easy answers, if there is an answer at all. In that sense McCloskey’s book illustrates what Catholic schools can be and pays tribute to what the Catholic Church in America may never again achieve.

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DAVID GIBSON is the author of *The Coming Catholic Church and The Rule of Benedict* and covers religion for *PoliticsDaily.com*.

JOHN HAWLEY

## ‘HOW LONG, O LORD?’

### GOD DROPS AND LOSES THINGS

By Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B.  
Liturgical Press. 70p \$11.95  
(paperback)  
ISBN 9780974099248

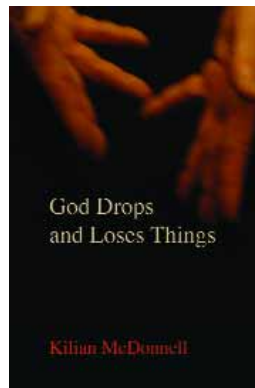
The titles of Kilian McDonnell’s two earlier collections of poetry, *Swift, Lord, You Are Not* and *Yahweh’s Other Shoe*, confirm what the latest might suggest: the author has fun with words. One wonders what “God drops” might be. As the conclusion of a trilogy, of course, the title suggests that this is the other shoe we have been warned about. As such, McDonnell moves relentlessly through the Bible and on to his own daily life in the monastery, and finally to old age and a stark con-

frontation with mortality, as his fellow monks drop (but not from God’s hands) like flies (or old shoes), and he echoes the psalmist’s lament: “How long, O Lord?”

But first there is the “losing” to endure. McDonnell has a knack of taking Yahweh to task by inhabiting the personalities described in the Old

Testament, the cynical complainers who kvetch about their devotion to the one true God. Arguing the nature/nurture controversy, a skeptical spokesperson from Deuteronomy puts respect aside and asks the rhetorical question, “Who parked Your well-greased/ chariot of war in my oafish/ genes?” The

relationship between Sarah and Abraham, with a little Hagar thrown in, gets the monk’s attention, resulting





in pithy proverbs that are culled through gritted teeth. Then there's Isaac, rarely heard from as he lies on the altar about to have his blood shed. He asks the question theologians suggest we are all meant to ask: "what kind/ of deity is this who asks this horror/ whose will lies in the absurd/ and in the abyss beyond?" Such is the conclusion of the first third of the book: "I do not speak of antiseptic rec-titude/ but fire's absolute autonomy that scolds me/ for putting dirty san-dals on glowing cinders/ but invites me to approach barefoot."

As the poems move into the New Testament, the complaints are less angry, but the hope more tenuous. John the Baptist, sitting in prison, asserts that "Whatever else/ I doubt, him I do not"; nonetheless he acknowledges that "God speaks to me/ no more. ...[and] all I hear/ are camels grunting outside/ my window and the music fading." The faith that is demanded in such silence echoes in the subtle refusal of Jesus to consider mar-riage in place of a mission: "Jesus shakes his head, runs his hand along his cedar plank/ feeling its smooth grain." At the last supper, the disciples face a stark choice: "When they look down/ no solid ground beneath them/ except my hand upon the table."

Confrontations with the inexplic-able are frequent throughout the poems—surely they are there in the accounts from the early books of the Bible, but equally in the more directly personal encounters with the deaths of McDonnell's friends. As evocative as the personae of the biblical poems are, these later poems about a man facing his oncoming death are more immedi-ately gripping and sincere. The exhaustion of old age is compared to Odysseus' dog, "who alone/ can recog-nize his master in disguise/ when he returns to Ithaca after twenty years./ The mutt, too weak to raise his head, too old to wag his tail, dies of joy." A similar note is struck with the rueful

observation that "at eighty-seven/ I guard my *ralentando*/ days, but they go." There is an echo of John in prison, but a clear sense of waiting, of expecta-tion: "So I sit beneath/ the maple with a blister on its trunk/ branches broken by a storm./ Someday I'll be found." The poet echoes Abraham Heschel and Francis Thompson, awaiting the hound who is seeking him. And, like John Donne, he concludes, "Where

death, there God."

It is no surprise that a late poem suggests the poet draws inspiration from Seamus Heaney, Emily Dickinson and Robert Hass. They would welcome him as a brother on the road.

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JOHN HAWLEY is chair of the department of English at Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, Calif.

PETER HEINEGG

## DEVOUT DROPOUT

### A LONG RETREAT

#### In Search of a Religious Life

By Andrew Krivak  
Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 336p \$25  
ISBN 9780374166069

The American Catholic (and secular) landscape is abuzz with the voluble presence of former Jesuits: from the stentorian television news commenta-tor John McLaughlin to the California politician Jerry Brown to the scholar-jour-nalist Garry Wills to the Pulitzer-Prize-winner Jack Miles to the popular histo-rian Thomas Cahill. (Full disclosure: this non-famous reviewer was a Jesuit too, from 1959 to 1966.)

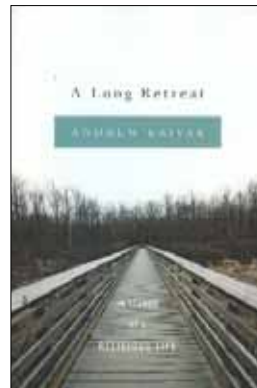
Now add to the list Andrew Krivak, a gifted Pennsylvania-born, London-based poet and writer, who spent eight years in the Jesuits before leaving—as most Catholic seminari-ans have, alas, been doing for over a generation—in 1998.

One thing most of these authors and activists have not talked much about is their own lives within, and their departure from, the Society. One exception might be the memoir *Ours*, by Francis E. Peters (1981), a distin-

guished professor of Islamic studies; but that book is chilly and unrevealing.

Like his fellow former priest turned writer, James Carroll in *Practicing Catholic*, Krivak is both passionate and eloquent; and he gives us a powerful picture of what has become a major narrative pattern in con-temporary Catholicism: Young cleric/religious bails out after running aground on the shoals of celibacy. (Krivak met and fell in love with his wife-to-be at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass.)

The most striking impression anyone raised in the pre-Vatican II church is likely to carry away from *The Long Retreat* will be of how much sem-inary life has changed. The numbers have slumped dramatically (the com-bined New York and Buffalo Province of the Jesuits had 30 novices in its 1959 "class"; by 1989 it had five, of whom one persevered). Candidates are older, more educated and more experi-enced than they used to be. (Krivak entered with an M.F.A. in creative writing from Columbia.) Jesuit forma-tion now offers—earlier and more than ever before—amazing opportu-



nities for travel and adventure, spiritual, intellectual and otherwise: Krivak worked in Santo Domingo and the Bronx, studied at Yale, lived in Moscow and Slovakia, taught college courses in literature and, without being ordained, served as a chaplain in schools and hospitals.

Apart from solid companionship, Krivak got just about everything he could have desired, including private lessons in Russian and Slovakian, psychiatric care in periods of maladjustment, and so on. It's all a far cry from the quasi-monastic life, with frequent, if largely symbolic, ascetical routines like self-flagellation, and endless restrictions (rural isolation, cassocks and clerical uniforms, rigid schedules) of the old days. Of course, we do live in a radically different world. Candidates for the Jesuits now have to be tested for H.I.V./AIDS. Altogether, it sounds like a grand system: open-minded, innovative, supremely generous—if it weren't for that dubious

retention rate. One minor observation: judging from Krivak's stories, whilst among themselves today's Jesuits use four-letter words as frequently and vigorously as the rest of the male population.

Krivak's title refers to the full-bore, 30-day version of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, which all Jesuits make at the beginning and end of their training. Krivak, in fact, appears to have been rather more given to contemplation than many of his confrères. Always something of a loner, he had been drawn by the example of Thomas Merton and the Trappist ideal of silence and seclusion. An instinctively prayerful person, he did not go through the usual doubts and questionings one might have expected from a graduate of the ultra-humanistic St. John's College, in Annapolis.

Krivak was not bothered by St. Ignatius' grimly literalist meditations on hell (which terrified the adolescent James Joyce) nor by the tensions between Loyola's combative Counter-Reformation mentality and the irenic, ecumenical mode of present-day Catholicism. A student and teacher of philosophy, he did not so much grapple with Nietzsche as cheerfully shrug him off. On the other hand, the frequent, inevitable contacts with young women on college campuses (Le Moyne, Fordham and elsewhere) put increasing pressure on a seminarian who also happened to be tall and good-looking, and who is now a happy husband and father.

No doubt literature about the seminary scene is so sparse because even in the hippest religious communities variety, change and conflict are in fairly short supply. St. Augustine never bothered to write a sequel to the *Confessions*. Krivak solves that problem with flashbacks to his hardscrabble boyhood in northeastern

Pennsylvania and his various seasonal he-man occupations (shipyard worker, deck hand, lifeguard). Unlike most old-style seminarians, Krivak brings some grownup life and painful guilt with him. Most notably, a late-night walk on the beach with an old girlfriend had led to an unplanned pregnancy and an abortion (her decision), which haunted him all the way into the cloister—and beyond.

Polls taken during the recent media hullabaloo over the Rev. Alberto Cutié show that Catholic laypeople, at least the ones in south Florida, have a generally positive attitude toward married clergy. But even if the rules were changed for parish priests, that would have no impact on religious life, rooted as it is in the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. So the paths of Andrew Krivak, as well as countless men like him, and the Jesuits were bound to diverge—permanently.

Still, the broken-off journey did him an enormous amount of good, helping to humanize, socialize and enlighten a "fringer" (a sometimes selfish non-conformist). For his part, Krivak feels both a sense of gratitude and a continuing connectedness with Christian discipleship and Ignatian spirituality—more strongly, it seems, than a lot of conventionally pious "exes." His Jesuit superiors (now on a previously unthinkable first-name basis with their younger charges) can congratulate themselves on a job well done.

Both they and he had other ideas when they welcomed him into the "modern sanctum" of the Jesuit residence on the campus of LeMoyne College in Syracuse; but sometimes journeys that fail to reach their intended destination can prove unusually fruitful.

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PETER HEINEGG is a professor of English at Union College, Schenectady, N.Y.

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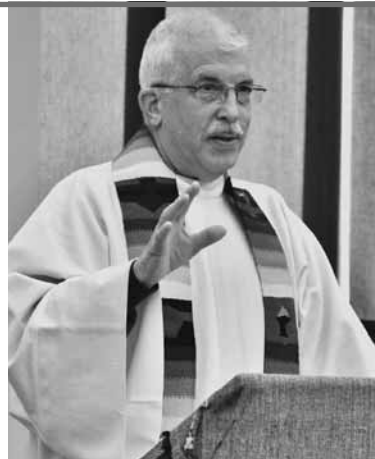
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## LETTERS

### Burning Flame

Just one question regarding "A Deacon's Lessons," by Greg Kandra (7/20): What about those of us who are called to the diaconate but have been given a resounding no for an answer? We are left with a burning flame, placed in the deepest part of our souls by God, which cannot be extinguished, even "on a cold floor."

STEPHANIE SIPE  
Akron, Ohio

### Learning From History

Re "The Modern Diaconate" (7/20): A coherent theology of the diaconate, I believe, cannot be developed without a clear, accurate understanding of the entire history of the diaconate, starting with the original seven who some say were the first deacons. No doubt the diaconate as currently lived has its variances from the diaconate in the first century of the church or the dia-

conate of the 12th century. Is today's diaconate the same calling of the Spirit as that to which were called the first deacons, or the deacons described by St. Ignatius of Antioch and others? In what way has the Holy Spirit's calling remained consistent, and in what way has it changed? These questions seem inadequately answered today.

Perhaps more easily answered is how the church's calling of men to this vocation has remained consistent and how it has varied. As the Second Vatican Council strove to accomplish, we too need to return to our roots, all the while reading the "signs of the times," and respond. Most of what I have read regarding the diaconate is a contemporary snapshot, a description of what it is now, with partial attention to its historical development. The entire period of time from about A.D. 800 to the Council of Trent goes largely unnoticed. At least I have not been apprised of any good reading for this time period in the Latin rite. Finally,

what can the Latin rite church glean from studying in earnest the rich history, theology and spirituality of the diaconate in the Eastern rite churches or the Orthodox?

BOB YERHOT  
Dakota, Minn.

### A Small and Angry Reaction

I have a nagging feeling in my gut that the diaconate ("Married and Ordained," 7/20) subtly supports an ordination practice that is painfully broken in our church. I know wonderful people who are deacons. Deacons do good work. Still, I feel an instinctual resentment at the ways the diaconate 1) still excludes women and 2) enables the current ordination policy. Deacons fill some staffing shortages and they reinforce the clericalism that chokes lively faith in action. The discussion about the role of wives seems silly to me. The wives are put in a publicly and structurally subordinate position no matter how personally sup-



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portive or ministerially active they are. What are we doing when we hold them up as models?

And speaking of subordinate women, it could be said that we offer ordination as “bonus,” if you will, for men in the diaconate formation programs, while (mostly) women in the lay pastoral ministry programs study much the same material, undergo similar faith formation and end up doing similar work without the sacramental privileges. Would many of these men be willing to study for pastoral certification and work in parishes if they were not offered the prestige of ordination at the conclusion of their studies?

I am a little afraid of my reactions on this topic because they are not informed by research or even much experience. They seem, well, small and angry. But my reactions persist even upon reflection.

So I wonder what reactions are my peers in the pew having? Are there any theologians or scholars out there writing about whether the diaconate ministry perpetuates harm?

LISA MAECHLING DEBBELER  
*Cincinnati, Ohio*

### **That Cold Stone Floor**

I commend Greg Kandra for his heartfelt article, “A Deacon’s Lessons” (7/20). I am a lay pastoral minister in my diocese. As such I am the pastoral care minister, chairperson of the parish liturgy committee, and in charge of the extraordinary ministers of holy Communion in my parish. Deacon Kandra is correct—the work in ministry is difficult, time-consuming and at times frustrating.

I too am moved to tears when I visit the homebound and look into the eyes of an Alzheimer victim, a paralyzed elderly person and a cancer sufferer. I

see Christ in them. He shines in their suffering and I am moved to tears when they smile and are so grateful I bring him to them. Sometimes at Mass when distributing holy Communion, my eyes fill with tears as I say “the Body of Christ” to my fellow parishioners. Yes, the hours are long, and some weeks I’m out four nights at meetings and prayer groups. It is hard but it is also rewarding.

I have never experienced that cold stone floor and I know I never will, because I am a woman and I cannot be ordained a deacon. But I have experienced the living Christ in the joy, the camaraderie, the fun, the teasing and the love of those I serve with in my parish. That joy brings the assurance and knowledge of the living God who holds and guides me as I serve his children.

I will never be ordained, but I too serve and am grateful to God for that privilege. Maybe someday we will have women deacons who will experience that stone floor and ordination too.

MARGARET C. JONES  
*Brooklyn, N.Y.*

### **The Missing Elements**

Re “The Stakeholder Society” (Editorial, 8/3): The current economic crisis in the U.S. banking-capitalist system, affecting the whole world, is based on the greed of corporate executives taking gross profits while bankrupting investors and clients’ bank accounts and giving loans without capital backing. Gratuity does not even touch the real problem. The homeless, unemployed and underpaid need a good fishing pole, not the gift of a fish from the overflowing nets of a wealthy patron. Morality, ethics and accountability are missing from the “gratuitousness” equation.

MICHAEL R. SASO  
*Los Angeles, Calif.*

### **Red Alert**

Regarding the essay “The Eyes of a Child” (8/3): Many years ago, in Bangor, Me., my 2-year-old came within a second of pulling the fire alarm (the pretty red box) right next to the area that housed the linear accelerator for which her physicist father was responsible. I suspect the response would have made the Maine state newspapers. I now notice all fire alarms within reaching distance of my 2-year-old grandson.

MARY JOAN GRAVES  
*Baldwin, N.Y.*

### **Truly an Improvement**

I compliment you on the new design introduced earlier this year. I love it! The use of photos and color is much better; the new font is elegant yet easy to read; and the new layout of the arts section is much improved. I especially like that the information on the book reviewer is included with the review, instead of having to page back to find out more about the reviewer.

I have seen many magazines implement new designs in the past few years and have hated every one until now. This is the first magazine redesign that is truly an improvement. Congratulations on a job well done!

CYNTHIA CHOVAN-DALTON  
*Jersey City, N.J.*

### **Beyond the White House**

Re the article “Legal Obligations” (8/3): Instead of the executive branch unilaterally writing its conception of what war powers may be, shouldn’t this be brought before the federal judiciary? There has been an interpretation of the law by one branch of government, the executive. Isn’t it for the judiciary to decide if that interpretation of the law is in line with the Constitution?

ANDREW J. RUSSELL  
*Appleton, Wis.*

**To send a letter to the editor** we recommend using the link that appears below articles on America’s Web site, [americamagazine.org](http://americamagazine.org).

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# Hard Choices; Inner Motives

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), AUG. 23, 2009

Readings: Jos 24:1-2, 15-18; Ps 34:2-3, 16-21; Eph 5:21-32; Jn 6:60-69

*“Decide today whom you will serve” (Jos 24:15)*

The commitment to be bound to another person for life is never made once and for all, but must be renewed again and again. This is true not only of our commitments to one another, but also of our commitment to God through Jesus. At particular moments we must decide definitively and not simply drift along.

In the first reading, Joshua calls together all the tribes of Israel and their leaders. For some of the people this may have been an occasion of initial commitment; for others it was a re-affirmation of a way they had already chosen. Joshua puts a choice before them: either serve the Lord who brought them out of slavery in Egypt, who performed great miracles before their eyes and who protected them all along the journey, or serve the other gods of the land in which they dwelt. It seems impossible and illogical to make any choice other than to respond wholeheartedly to God, who had begun the relationship with such extraordinary saving acts. Joshua leads the way by declaring that he and his household will serve God alone.

A similar choice is set before the disciples of Jesus in today’s Gospel. The decision is whether to believe in the one whose words are “spirit and life.” The setting is the aftermath of Jesus’ feeding of the multitude and his

invitation to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Unlike the first reading, the choice here is not so evident and logical. The disciples say, “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” What Jesus asks of them is shocking, as he himself recognizes.

It includes a mysterious element of gift that is inexplicable (like the fact that we can never fully or logically explain why we would choose to spend our whole life with another when such a commitment is bound to entail great difficulties). Love and the gracious gift of God are often all we can offer to explain such a choice.

Hard choices must also be made when we face changed circumstances. Sometimes commitments once made have to be re-evaluated. Former President Jimmy Carter recently described the painful decision he made in 2000 to break his ties with the Southern Baptist Convention, because they insisted on the subservience of women to men and barred women from serving as deacons, pastors or chaplains in the military service. After belonging to this denomination for six decades, he made a difficult choice.

The second reading today invites us to re-examine patterns of relationship that can harm women rather than foster greater love. This segment of Ephesians is a Christian adaptation of the household codes common from

the time of Aristotle. These outlined the proper workings of a Greek home in terms of the *paterfamilias* as ruler, to whom the women, children and slaves were subordinate. The version in

Ephesians begins by exhorting the mutual subordination of husbands and wives to one another out of reverence for Christ, but then elaborates only one direction of the relationship: the responsibilities of husbands and the subservience of wives to them. This reading is most often



## PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- Reflect on the life-choice commitments you have made. What reaffirmations need to be expressed in words?
- What commitments do you need to re-examine?
- Invite Jesus to help you conduct an inventory of your heart. What are your motivations for the religious practices you have embraced?
- How does the love in your heart express itself in action on behalf of the most vulnerable?

used to reinforce male domination over women.

Yet the model presented to husbands is that of Christ’s complete self-sacrificing love for the church. If husbands exercised such self-surrender in love toward their wives, it would result in the dismantling of structures of male domination and initiate a whole new pattern of mutual respect and self-giving love. This manner of relating goes against the grain of most

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cultures. Just as Jesus' disciples exclaimed in the Gospel about how hard it was to accept his self-gift of flesh and blood, so it is not easy for us to make a commitment to new patterns of relating if they require mutual self-surrender to one another in love. One must make a deliberate choice to learn about and put into practice egalitarian ways of relating, which also involve leaving behind familiar ways. It is an urgent choice for life or death. Choose today.

**TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), AUG. 30, 2009**

Readings: Dt 4:1-8; Ps 15:2-5; Jas 1:17-27; Mk 7:1-8, 14-23

*"Religion that is pure...is to care for orphans and widows in their affliction" (Jas 1:27)*

In today's Gospel the Pharisees and scribes challenge Jesus, asking why his disciples do not follow practices regarding ritual washing. The roots of these practices are found in Ex 30:19 and 40:12. They concern the custom of priests to wash their hands and feet before entering into the tent of meeting. By the second century B.C.E. some Jews who were not priests had voluntarily assumed the practice of ritual washing of their hands before morning prayer and before eating. In the Gospel reading the washing extends also to the utensils for preparing the meal and to the purification of the dining couch. The Pharisees seem to presume that these should be universal practices. But such observances would have been nearly impossible for peasant farmers, fishermen and itinerants like Jesus to observe, given the scarcity of water and contact with dead fish and other pollutants. This "tradition of the elders" (v. 3) was likely one largely defined and maintained by urban elites.

In response to the Pharisees, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah to expose the disconnection between lip-service and motivations of the heart. It is not only that Jesus' opponents have forgotten the true motivation for their religious practices; they have substituted humanly contrived practices for God's commandments. Jesus points toward examination of our inner motives. Our practices must flow from and reflect our profound experience of God's love and care.

It can happen, however, that originally good practices deteriorate over time into meaningless customs or, worse, showy external observance. It is helpful to examine periodically our religious practices, assessing how well they embody God's love and impel us toward greater love of one another.

It is also important for us to recognize the ways in which the heart can stray, as the ending of today's Gospel emphasizes. The enumeration of vices is a typical teaching device used by

Hellenistic philosophers (see also Rom 1:29-31; Gal 5:9-21). Jesus warns that it is not external observance or lack of it that determines one's relationship with God, but a heart that is ever being transformed by divine love, which becomes visible in concrete acts.

The Letter of James elaborates on how our care for the most vulnerable serves as the measuring rod for how well we are putting into action the saving word we hear. It is not enough to experience love within our hearts; love must find expression in outward deeds. And it is not only the individual recipient of a kind act who benefits from heart-motivated devotion to God; the faithful keeping of God's commandments gives far-reaching witness to others. In the reading from Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people that their observance of God's commands is not only for their benefit; it will also cause the other nations to marvel at God's graciousness and justice.

**BARBARA E. REID**

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