



A journal for restless minds

TURN DOWN THE LIGHTS

Extinguishing the conscience

SHIP OF FOOLS REDUX

Still lost and sinking fast

NONE SO BLIND

As those that will not see

DEACON'S DINER

Food for a restless mind

Colloquī is a Deacon's Corner weekly journal. Its mission and purpose: to encourage serious discussion, to promote reasoned debate, and to provide serious content for those who hope to find their own pathway to God.

Each week Colloquī will contain articles on theology, philosophy, faith, religion, Catholicism, and much more.

Be forewarned! Articles may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the express intent to seek the Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

Turn Down The Lights

Extinguishing the conscience

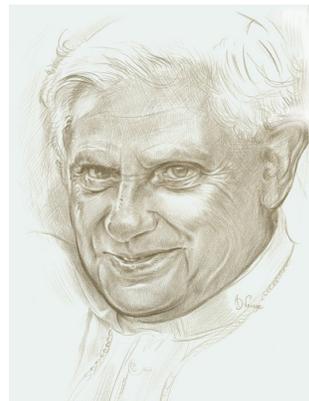
There is a growing sentiment among many that Pope (Emeritus) Benedict XVI should be, after his death, declared a Doctor of the Church. Few would disagree that the gentle, humble, self-effacing man born Joseph Ratzinger on Holy Saturday, April 16, 1927 has been a brilliant theologian and a prodigious writer.

Just 35 years old at the outset of the Second Vatican Council, then Father Joseph Ratzinger served as a *peritus*, or expert theological consultant to Cardinal Frings of Cologne and was an important and respected voice throughout the four sessions of the Council.

Now, as he approaches his ninth decade, a new book, *Benedict XVI Last Testament* in his own words, written by Peter Seewald in an interview format, Pope Benedict speaks candidly of his life as a theologian, a priest, bishop, cardinal,

and pope. It is an amazing read, revealing the depths of his humility and devotion to God and Church. There is so much that can be said, but two quotes should be enough to illustrate:

Asked: *"So when you stand before the Almighty, what will you say to him?"* he responded: *"I will plead with him to show leniency towards my wretchedness."*



Elsewhere he opines that *"The real problem at this moment of our history, is that God is disappearing from the human horizon."* He emphasizes that the real crisis confronting the Catholic Church is not a scarcity of priests, nor even declining membership; it is a dwindling faith. The neglect of

God and the extinguishment of Christian conscience are at the root of the crisis. The consequence is lukewarm worship, watered-down liturgy, neglect of missions, and an uncertain, quavering voice on the great moral dilemmas of our time.

Such an indictment should give Catholics everywhere pause. His voice, like Aquinas, is too important to ignore.

A Ship Of Fools Redux

Still lost and sinking fast

[Editor's note:] A reader recently asked what I meant by a "secular relativist vacuum" and why I found it disturbing. (*What Love Is This*, Colloqui 1:40, Feb. 24, 2017). I have written of this before (*A Ship Of Fools: Lost at sea*, Deacon's Corner, 156, Nov. 26, 2014) so what follows may be somewhat familiar to some, although I have expanded on some points for greater clarity.



Arguably, the debate concerning the existence of God has been waging for a very long time, and no doubt the battle will continue into the far distant future. Perhaps it may even go on until the end of time itself when, irrespective of which side of the argument you reside, it will be resolved without the necessity for further debate. Rest assured, eventually the answer to the question will become perfectly obvious to everyone.

What *is* perfectly obvious today is that a large majority find themselves holding to a belief in a Divine Presence, the Source of all that exists, and the Creator of us all. Those who do not hold to such a belief are decidedly in the minority.

What is difficult to determine with any precision or accuracy is the population of those who proclaim a belief in

God but find the matter largely irrelevant within the conduct of their daily lives. Assuredly and equally unfortunate, their numbers are both significant and growing.

It is important to note that the preponderance of the population will readily admit to believing in God; that is and never has been at issue. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI explained this with remarkable insight when he wrote that it is "not as though God had been denied—not on your life! He simply was not needed in regard to the 'reality' that mankind had to deal with. God had nothing to do."¹



He adds, "Has not Christian consciousness acquiesced to a great extent—without being aware of it—in the attitude that faith in God is something subjective, which belongs in the private realm and not in the common activities of public life where, in order to be able to get along, we all have to behave now *etsi Deus non daretur* (as if there were no God)."

GOD DECLARED IRRELEVANT

God has no relevance to man, or so man proclaims, for man no longer believes in absolutes. "Absolute truth belongs only to one class of humans—the class of absolute fools."² So claimed Ash-

ley Montagu, evolutionist and humanist. Montagu makes it clear that, at best, truth is relative—and anyone who states differently is to be categorized as a fool. Sir Julian Huxley agreed: "We must now be prepared to abandon the god hypothesis and its corollaries like divine revelation or unchanging truths, and to change over from a supernatural to a naturalistic view of human destiny."³

This ever-increasing, or so it would appear, attitude of "supreme self-sufficiency," the burning desire to cut ourselves loose from the apron strings of God, is inexplicable yet it has clearly taken root and continues to grow at an alarming rate. The late paleontologist of Harvard, George Gaylord Simpson wrote:

"Man stands alone in the universe, a unique product of a long, unconscious, impersonal, material process with unique understanding and potentialities. These he owes to no one but himself, and it is to himself that he is responsible. He is not the creature of uncontrollable and undeterminable forces, but is his own master. He can and must decide and manage his own destiny."⁴

There are two premises underlying these arguments for man's self-sufficiency: first, that there are no absolute truths—that the best that can be argued is that all truth is relative; second, that the truth about God is relative. Thus, the conclusion: those who believe in God are fools. This "logical" statement is patently illogical and verifiably false, yet few would attempt to

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voice a counter-argument for fear of being forever characterized a fool.

What then must be said? Let us begin by looking at the claim that there is no absolute truth, that all truth is relative. Is that true? If it is true that all truth is relative, then doesn't that necessarily argue that it must be absolutely true and if it is absolutely true, then it cannot be relatively true?

But let us dig deeper. Relativism is the philosophical position that all points of view are equally valid, and that all truth is relative to the individual. Here we can categorize relativism into three groups⁵:

- **Cognitive relativism** (truth) — affirms that all truth is relative, meaning no system of truth is more valid than another one, and that there is no objective standard of truth. This thus denies that there is a God of absolute truth.
- **Moral/Ethical relativism** — all morality and ethics are relative to the social group within which they are constructed
- **Situational relativism** — Ethics (right and wrong) are dependent upon the situation.

The philosophy of relativism has become pervasive within our culture and society. Absolute truth has been abandoned and God has been rejected. The notions of right and wrong, good and evil have been relativized, left to the whims of the individual. It has become a plague of pandemic proportions. This plague of moral relativism

has infected us, weakening our intrinsic moral norms, encouraging what were once considered moral wrongs (“*sin*” and “*evil*”) to now be accepted as relative goods. Anyone who dares speak out against moral relativism and its “*anything goes*” philosophy is instantly labeled an intolerant bigot.

The blatant hypocrisy of this is lost on those who profess that all points of view are true. What moral relativism means is that all points of view are true except those views that profess and teach moral absolutes, an absolute God, or absolute right and wrong.

If morality and ethics are relative, then “*right*” and “*wrong*” are reduced to opinion. If there are no moral absolutes, no absolute God, no absolute truth then there can be no moral facts, only moral opinion. In a secular world, there can only be opinions about morality; they may be either personal or societal opinions, but only opinions. Even atheist philosophers acknowledge that without God, there can be no objective morality.

Let's pause to clarify what we mean when we use the word “*secular*.” Secular is an adjective denoting attitudes, activities, or other things that have no religious or spiritual basis; contrasted with sacred.

In the context of this essay, it will generally be associated with humanism (*secular humanism*), a worldview that the entire universe and all life are the result of random coincidence. The secularist contends that the universe created itself and that random chemicals just happily combined to form a single-celled lifeform which

mutated over billions of years into the incredible array of life found on earth today. To the secularist, we are nothing more than an advanced animal, or a chance combination of chemicals. There is no God, no absolutes. There is only happy coincidence.

Now nothing that has been said so far should be construed to mean that if you don't believe in God, you aren't a good person. Christians hold no singular claim to goodness. There are plenty of good and moral atheists, just as there are plenty of Christians who are immoral and evil. Their existence has nothing to do with whether there is a God. The existence of God only ensures that good and evil objectively exist and are not merely opinions.

Without God, there are no moral absolutes, what we are left with is moral relativism—morality relative to the individual or society (please note that this must, by definition, be reduced to individual opinion.) Without God, “*good*” and “*evil*” are reduced to nothing more than “*I like*” and “*I don't like*.” If there is no God, the statement “*Murder is evil*” is the moral equivalent to “*I don't like murder*.”

There are, of course, those who would argue that moral absolutes are not necessary. They would argue that people refrain from murder because they don't wish to be murdered. That opinion is nothing more than wishful thinking. No doubt, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao were averse to being murdered, yet their personal aversion didn't prevent them from murdering hundreds of millions of people.

None So Blind

As those that will not see

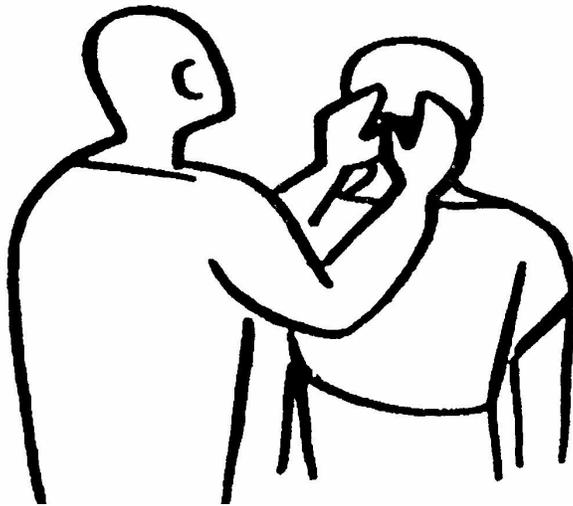
Seventeenth century nonconformist minister Matthew Henry in his commentary on verses two and three of Psalm 82 wrote *"A gift in secret blinds their eyes. They know not because they will not understand. None so blind as those that will not see. They have baffled their own consciences, and so they walk on in darkness."*

Singer and songwriter Ray Stevens, in the song, *Everything is Beautiful*, offers a similar thought *"There is none so blind as he who will not see. We must not close our minds; we must let our thoughts be free."*

We are all born blind, unable to see, for the brain lacks the necessary skills, born from experience, to interpret the visual data impinging on the retinas. Simply put, we have to learn how to see, how to sort out the visual data, how to interpret the visual cues about space, distance, and how our bodies relate to the panoply of things that surround us.

For those born without sight, such as the man in John's Gospel, the restoration of sight after years of blindness is seldom a pleasant experience. Often it is quite the opposite: for the newly sighted the initial experience is one of visual disorientation, confusion and pain; the brain untrained in the rules of seeing, is literally assaulted by a spinning amorphous mass of light and colors.

Yet, even now, as it was in ancient times, there are those so blind by nothing more than their own refusal to see the truth, to believe what they see. The Pharisees in the Gospel, exemplifying what Paul calls *"fruitless works of darkness,"* refused to see what they did not wish to see. Even Samuel, in the first reading, initially saw only what he wanted to see. The Lord had to remind Samuel, telling him: *"Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the LORD looks into the heart."*



Helen Keller, born both deaf and blind, once wrote: *"At times my heart cries out with longing to see..."*

If I can get so much pleasure from mere touch, how much more beauty must be revealed by sight. Yet, those who have eyes apparently see little. The panorama of color and action which fills the world is taken for granted. It is human, perhaps, to appreciate little that which we have and to long for that which we have not, but it is a great pity that in the world of light the gift of sight is used only as a mere convenience rather than as a means of adding fullness to life.... How many of you, I wonder, when you gaze at a play, a movie, or any

spectacle, realize and give thanks for the miracle of sight which enables you to enjoy its color, grace, and movement?"¹

It is all too easy to fool the eyes, as any illusionist can quickly prove. A recent photograph of a dress worn by the mother of a bride has been viewed by over 28 million people, examined by a plethora of experts, and been the subject of numerous news reports all because some people say the dress has white and gold stripes while others insist that it has blue and black stripes!

What we see through our eyes is always colored by our past, skewed by what we believe we know, altered by what we do not understand, and often *"seen indistinctly, as in a mirror."*² Even when we are confronted by the truth we often refuse to alter our perceptions because as Mark Twain once quipped, *"Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth is not."*

In *"The Myth of the Cave"*, the Greek philosopher Plato weaves a story where all of humanity lives their lives chained within a darkened cave, with nothing but shadows and illusions flickering upon a wall to define their reality. One man escapes his bonds, travels beyond the darkness of the cave, and looks upon the sun and sees the world as it truly is. When he returns and tells the others what he has seen and experienced they refuse to believe it. His truth must be mere fantasy, an illusion, the ravings of a

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madman, and he is summarily dismissed. They simply deny his experience. It just cannot be, for they know that the chains and the amusing images on the wall are reality. Thus he is ridiculed and his invitation refused.³

This is how Plato describes the intellectual assent of the soul to truth. To contemplate divine life is to find freedom; but it is also to encounter opposition from “*the evil state of man, misbehaving in a ridiculous manner, arguing over shadows and images.*”

There are clear parallels between the myth of the cave and the story of the man born blind. Each upon receiving new sight is rejected by those who remained chained to their old ways of thinking, by those who would rather cling to their chains and discuss the shadows than embark on a journey of faith.

How often do we dismiss or deny that which conflicts with our own perception of reality? How often are we like those who knew the beggar when he was blind and now that he could see refused to admit they knew him, even when he said to them that it was indeed he who had been blind.

The blind man’s neighbors and the Pharisees saw with their own eyes that the one who had been blind from birth could now see, but they refused to acknowledge the truth of it. Some suggested that it was someone who closely resembled the blind man. The Pharisees, after questioning the man’s parents and the man himself, while neither admitting nor denying his miracu-

lous healing, chose instead to focus on the one who restored his sight, Jesus. They chose to ignore the truth before their eyes *ad hominem*, by attacking the character of Jesus: “*This man is not from God, because he does not keep the Sabbath.*”⁴

When the Pharisees threw the man out of the temple, Jesus found him and asked him if he believed in the Son of Man. When the man asked who that was, Jesus responded: “*You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he*”⁵ and the man immediately fell to his knees and professed his faith in him. He saw with eyes that were once blind but could now see, and he believed.

Blindness comes in many forms but seldom do we recognize any but the physical inability to see through the eyes in our head. Those who are organically blind, whether from birth or later in life, learn to adapt to their inability to see. They learn to see by sharper hearing, more sensitive touch, even a more delicate nose.

Blindness that is the result of hatred, ignorance, jealousy, greed, lust, selfishness, ego or other aberrant, sinful desires, dulls the senses and blinds the spirit. Closed minds are adamantly blind to reason and to truth; they would blind themselves rather than acknowledge that the emperor wears no clothes.

It is one thing to deny or refuse to accept what our eyes have not seen but it is quite another to deny what we have seen. To believe what we have not seen is called faith and as Saint Augustine tells us, “*Faith is to believe what you do not see; the re-*

ward of this faith is to see what you believe.” What Augustine writes is an essential element of who we are as Christians and as believers, for if we do not believe in God, whom we do not see, then we most certainly will not see him beyond the grave.

Believing is the deepest kind of seeing. The Gospel account exemplifies seeing as a symbol of believing. The Johannine community, for whom this Gospel was written, would have clearly understood the narrative, not as a healing account, but as a metaphor on the meaning and purpose of baptism and the awakening of faith. We are all born blind spiritually and we cannot hope to see the fullness of reality until the clay that blinds our souls is washed clean by the waters of baptism. As with the physical vision with which we are born, our spiritual vision (*faith*) does not come fully realized; it is something we must learn to use.

Our lives are measured by the passage of time and we cannot expect to see God until we have passed from this life into the next, yet we ought to take comfort in our faith, for as Jesus told his disciples when he appeared to them after his resurrection, “*Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.*”⁶ Amen.

Homily for the
Fourth Sunday of Lent (A)
1 Samuel 16:1, 6-7, 10-13
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

1. Helen Keller, *Three Days to See*, The Atlantic Monthly, January 1933.

2. 1 Cor 13:12.

3. Plato, *The Republic: The Myth of the Cave*.

4. John 9:16.

5. John 9:37.

6. John 20:29.

God has no relevance to man, or so man proclaims. Without God there is nothing and no one to establish an objective moral code or to elevate the respect due for every human life. We are living in a society, and in a world, where God has been declared irrelevant, where there is no absolute truth and therefore all truth is both subjective and relative, and where one lives by a self-imposed, ego-centric moral code. Take but a cursory look around and you will see the countless vacuous minions who have so fully subscribed to such a self-absorbed, self-immolating, amoral, narcissistic culture.

In an allegorical tale perhaps best known as the *Ship of Fools*, Plato describes a vessel populated by deranged, frivolous, or oblivious passengers aboard a ship without a pilot. They are completely ignorant of where they are going and care nothing for the circumstances of their fellow passengers or for themselves. What is most disconcerting is how Plato's prescient philosophical musings fall far too close to the current cultural lineation to provide us with any small comfort.

Those who find no relevance for God are like the fool who built his house on sand. Without a foundation constructed upon the solid rock of God's law, a fool's house, his life, and those who built likewise, will be lost to the vagaries and fickleness of the slightest breeze or the mildest weather.

THE CALCULUS OF RELEVANCE

This attitude that dismisses and discards God to the trash heap of irrelevance carries with it implications and

ramifications often not immediately apparent or readily realized. Removing God from the Calculus of Relevance eradicates the foundational underpinnings for moral behavior. If man, absent God, decides what is right or wrong, good or bad, true or false, then morality becomes the plaything of subjective argument and personal relevancy.

What subsequently is elevated to greater importance, what is deemed most relevant is *neither* God *nor* His commandments upon which we are obliged to adhere, but that which we decide is right for us, what is of personal relevance, the moral code which we *choose* to define and follow. There are no absolutes, no objective moral code upon which one is *forced* to conduct one's self. I choose, I decide. I win, you lose. I'm right, you're wrong. I'm good, you're bad. I live, you die. Please take careful note of the fact that the central tenet upon which life (or more specifically, life other than one's own) is now subjectively focused is on "I" which quite clearly dismisses the inconsequential existence that is *not* "I". Only "I" am relevant, all else is of no great import, entering the conscious mind only to the extent that it is relative to the all-important "I".

A LOSS OF VALUE

It does not take much effort to see how deeply ingrained this subjective, relativistic misanthropy has enveloped and ensconced itself within the very fabric and timbre of our lives. The dehumanization and devaluation of human life is both glaringly and publicly evident in the unfathomable volume of judicially *legal* – although objectively

and morally unjust and illegitimate – terminations (killings) exercised through acts of abortions, euthanasia, and assisted suicides, the horrendous acts of barbarism, terrorism, and genocide perpetrated on a global scale, and the widespread and growing pandemic created by the pornography, sex and slave trade industries.

Perhaps nothing exemplifies the devaluation of human life more than those who ascribe to the thinking of radical environmentalism, specifically to that of animal rights activism, which espouses to a form of cosmological egalitarianism. This egalitarianism has an instinctive distaste for hierarchical ordering and especially for assigning value within the natural world in accordance with increasing levels of complexity, organization, and awareness.

"Traditional taxonomy divides living organisms into plant and animal kingdoms and then describes and ranks them from lesser to greater, with its high termination in man. This way of doing things accorded with philosophy and theology that assigned value in accordance with a universal principle—"you are worth more than many sparrows." Egalitarianism, however, with its attendant prejudices against not only value assignment, but the very acknowledgement of hierarchy, radically destabilizes any institution in which it is allowed free rein.

Touching those of natural science, it leads to the inability to consider human populations more important than those of other animals, turns endangered species lists into religious litanies, and allows university teachers to propose that the

death of much of the human race on behalf of the biosphere might not be all that bad. Linnaeus would not be proud.”⁶

What this egalitarian view emphasizes is that humans are no more valuable than a dog or a cat or even a tree. The God-centric understanding of man created in his image and likeness, and thus of infinite value has been replaced by the secular humanistic and relativistic view that devalues the worth of the human person. Their reasoning: since there is no God, human beings are only material beings—and worth nothing beyond the matter of which they are composed. The result: over the past 30 years, when high school and college students have been asked if they would first try to save their dog or a stranger, two-thirds have always voted against the person. PETA, that animal rights group argues that there is no difference between the barbecuing of chickens in America and the burning of Jews in the Holocaust.

What makes this so terribly appalling is that we appear to have lost the ability or desire to be horrified by any of it at all. We have become dead to life; overwhelmed by the realization that so much of mankind has declared both God and His creation to be irrelevant. We have largely and in a very real sense abdicated our rational minds to unthinking, mindless group-think, all while having an unreasoning compulsion to “just get along” with that thousand-pound gorilla standing menacingly before us. Man’s inhumanity has supplanted and suborned any vestiges of that humanity which has been gifted to him by God.

THE MISSING CONSTANT

Without God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – at its core, life as we understand it, becomes nothing more than an amorphous existence, without meaning or purpose. And if one’s epistemology holds that life is irrelevant then it necessarily follows that the value of any and all life is worth little or nothing at all. If life holds no value, then assuredly love is lost as well, for love can only embrace that which it holds most dear. To love and to be loved presupposes and requires an existence worthy of love, both human and divine.

Here we may finally deduce that essential element which has been so blatantly and quite surgically excised from the calculus, and that is the relevance and essential presence of God. God is the purest and ultimate form of love, for He *is* Love. God created us out of love and loves all of His creation without condition or qualification. God’s love for us preordains our value, for love of a nullity is irrational, it is absolute nonsense which makes no sense at all.

God is *the* essential Element, the Constant upon which all life is derived. Remove God from the calculus and nothing remains, absolutely nothing. God *does* matter. God *is* relevant. It is only the foolish who would dare to declare otherwise.

1. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2000.
2. Ashley Montagu, *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, p. 4-C, July 26, 1981.
3. Julian Huxley, *Fortune Magazine*, February 1965..
4. George Gaylord Simpson, *Life of the Past* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953).
5. Matt Slick, *What is relativism?*, Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry.
6. S. M. Hutchens, *Quodlibet: Man on the Level*, Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity, March/April 2017, 5.

Deacon’s Diner

Food for a restless mind

For those restless minds that hunger and thirst for more. Each week this space will offer a menu of interesting and provocative titles, written by Catholic authors, in addition to those referenced in the articles, for you to feed your restless mind.

BOOKS

Faith Comes From What Is Heard

Lawrence Feingold

Emmaus Academic
July 8, 2016, 756 pages.

Called To Communion

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

Ignatius Press
1996, 165 pages.

Orthodoxy

G. K. Chesterton

Digireads.com
March 30, 2004, 121 pages.
Originally published 1908.

PERIODICALS

First Things

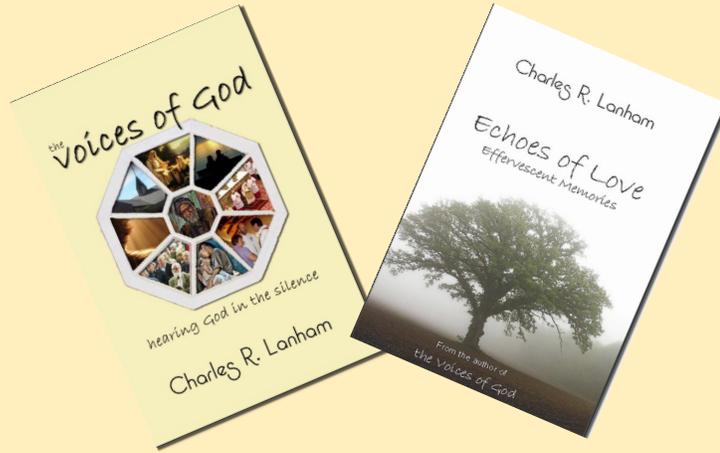
Institute on Religion and Public Life
Editor: R. R. Reno
Ten Issues per year.
www.firstthings.com

Touchstone

A Journal of Mere Christianity
Editor: James M. Kushiner
Bi-Monthly.
www.touchstonemag.com

Catholic Answers Magazine

Share the Faith, Defend the Faith
Editor: Tim Ryland
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deaconscorner.org

Deacon Chuck Lanham is an author, columnist, speaker, and a servant of God.

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Each issue of **Colloquī** can be viewed or downloaded from

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