

Colloquī

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A journal for restless minds

Doing To Others

Winning at all costs

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.

Doing To Others

Winning at all costs

Our arrogance knows no bounds. How else to describe the multitudes who give no credence to the providence of Almighty God, resting all truth and goodness upon the human heart, ever more so on their own pulsation. It is much too easy and far more profitable to live a lie than accept the truth; a thought upon which Satan surely does rely.

Arrogance assumes a false surfeit of knowledge, a knowing in superficial excess without penalty of conscious thought. Such faux knowing, no doubt, will soon gain recognition and acclaim as a national pastime or perhaps an Olympic sport, the gold medal awarded to the one judged most sincerely ignorant and conscientiously stupid.

In 2013, the Nation's Report Card indicated of the nation's high school seniors only 38% were at or above the *Proficient* achievement level in reading and a mere 26% in mathematics. Two years later, the report reflected a one percent decline in both areas. What is more alarming, between 2013 and 2015 the

percentage of twelfth-grade students performing *below* the *Basic* achievement level had increased three percentage points in both reading (from 25% to 28%) and mathematics (from 35% to 38%).

"Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity."

~ Martin Luther King Jr.

As abysmal as these statistics are—and there is no indication of any improvement—other areas are lower still. Proficiency in civics (24%), geography (20%), science (22%) and writing (27%) are embarrassing and tragic for three-fourths of high school graduates. What is even more egregious is that 88% of high school seniors, most of whom will be or will be soon, old

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enough to vote, are below the *Proficient* achievement level in U. S. History.

What is most alarming—as it should be—are the overall U. S. literacy statistics, which back up the findings from the NAEP report card:

- 14% of adults can't read.
- Only 13% of adults can read at a proficient level.
- 28% of adults didn't read a book last year.
- 50% of adults can't read a book written at an 8th grade level.

So horrifying are these statistics, even Stephen King would have difficulty writing such a terrifying tale. And yet, some may ask, "So what?" In this age of digital enlightenment, who needs to be literate? Is this not the case of "no harm, no foul?" Well, ... no, in truth illiteracy causes a great deal of harm, especially as it pertains to governance.

Here, a quick U.S. history lesson: John Adams, who would subsequently become the second President of the United States (1797-1801), wrote in his diary for August 1, 1761:

... the English Law greatly favours Education. In every English Country, some sort of Education, some Acquaintance with Letters, is necessary, that a Man may fill any station whatever. ... in England and its Colonies, Freedom of Enquiry is allowed to be not only the Privilege but the Duty of every Individual. We know it to be our Duty, to read, examine and judge for ourselves, even of ourselves what is right. No Priest nor Pope has any Right to say what I shall believe, and I will not believe one Word

they say, if I think it is not founded in Reason and in Revelation. Now how can I judge what My Bible justifies unless I can read my Bible.

The English Constitution is founded, tis bottomed And grounded on the Knowledge and good sense of the People. The very Ground of our Liberties, is the freedom of Elections. Every Man has in Politicks as well as Religion, a Right to think and speak and Act for himself. No man either King or Subject, Clergyman or Layman has any Right to dictate to me the Person I shall choose for my Legislator and Ruler. I must judge for myself, but how can I judge, how can any Man judge, unless his Mind has been opened and enlarged by Reading. A Man who can read, will find in his Bible, in the common sermon Books that common People have by them and even in the Almanack and News Papers, Rules and observations, that will enlarge his Range of Thought, and enable him the better to judge who has and who has not that Integrity of Heart, and that Compass of Knowledge and Understanding, which form the Statesman.

Adams, along with the other founders, understood the necessity for "some sort of Education" in order for every one to be able to fill whatever station in life they might pursue. Every individual must be allowed the freedom to inquire, to acquire the requisite knowledge; it is not only their privilege (in today's parlance: "right") but also their duty ("responsibility"). "We know it to be our Duty, to read, examine and judge for ourselves, even of ourselves what is right."

"The very Ground of our Liberties," Adams wrote, "is the freedom of Elections. Every Man has in Politicks

as well as Religion, a Right to think and speak and Act for himself."

But, Adams goes on to acknowledge what we have since forgotten or left to slip from persistent memory: the necessity to "judge for myself, but how can I judge, how can any Man judge, unless his Mind has been opened and enlarged by Reading. A Man who can read, will find" in his reading "... observations, that will enlarge His Range of Thought, and enable him the better to judge"

A century later, Pope Leo XIII, in his Encyclical *Inscrutabili Dei Consilio* (On the Evils of Society), promulgated in 1878, wrote with much the same mind.

5. It is perfectly clear and evident, venerable brothers, that the very notion of civilization is a fiction of the brain if it rests not on the abiding principles of truth and the unchanging laws of virtue and justice, and if unfeigned love knot not together the wills of men, and gently control the interchange and the character of their mutual service.

6. Furthermore, that kind of civilization which conflicts with the doctrines and laws of holy Church is nothing but a worthless imitation and meaningless name. ... Undoubtedly, that cannot by any means be accounted the perfection of civilized life which sets all legitimate authority boldly at defiance; nor can that be regarded as liberty which, shamefully and by the vilest means, spreading false principles, and freely indulging the sensual gratification of lustful desires, claims impunity for all crime and misdemeanor, and thwarts the goodly influence of the worthiest citizens of

whatsoever class. Delusive, perverse, and misleading as are these principles, they cannot possibly have any inherent power to perfect the human race and fill it with blessing, for "sin maketh nations miserable" (Proverbs 14:34). Such principles, as a matter of course, must hurry nations, corrupted in mind and heart, into every kind of infamy, weaken all right order, and thus, sooner or later, bring the standing and peace of the State to the very brink of ruin.

What is remarkable, coming as it did, one hundred and forty-one years ago, is the encyclical's continued currency. Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) occupied the chair of St. Peter for 25 years, 5 months and 1 day, the third longest reign in papal history. Only the pontificates of his immediate predecessor, Blessed Pius IX (1846-1878) and St. John Paul II (1978-2005) were longer.

In writing on the evils of society, Leo made clear what was needed to foreclose on the growing threat against the Catholic Church: zealous education of the faith, beginning at the earliest age.

13. ... It is your duty, venerable brothers, sedulously to strive that the seed of heavenly doctrine be sown broadcast into the field of God, and that the teachings of the Catholic faith may be implanted early in the souls of the faithful, may strike deep root in them, and be kept free from the ruinous blight of error. The more the enemies of religion exert themselves to offer the uninformed, especially the young, such instruction as darkens the mind and corrupts morals, the more actively should we endeavor

that not only a suitable and solid method of education may flourish but above all that this education be wholly in harmony with the Catholic faith in its literature and system of training, and chiefly in philosophy, upon which the direction of other sciences in great measure depends. Philosophy seeks not the overthrow of divine revelation, but delights rather to prepare its way, and defend it against assailants, both by example and in written works, as the great Augustine and the Angelic Doctor, with all other teachers of Christian wisdom, have proved to Us.

14. Now, the training of youth most conducive to the defense of true faith and religion and to the preservation of morality must find its beginning from an early stage within the circle of home life; and this family Christian training sadly undermined in these our times, cannot possibly be restored to its due dignity, save by those laws under which it was established in the Church by her Divine Founder Himself. Our Lord Jesus Christ, by raising to the dignity of a sacrament the contract of matrimony, in which He would have His own union with the Church typified, not only made the marriage tie more holy, but, in addition, provided efficacious sources of aid for parents and children alike, so that, by the discharge of their duties one to another, they might with greater ease attain to happiness both in time and in eternity. But when impious laws, setting at naught the sanctity of this great sacrament, put it on the same footing of mere civil contracts, the lamentable result followed, that, outraging the dignity of Christian matrimony, citizens made use of legalized concubinage in place of marriage; husband and wife neglected their bounden duty to each other; children refused obedience and reverence to their parents; the bonds of domestic love were loosened; and alas! the worst scandal

and of all the most ruinous to public morality, very frequently an unholy passion opened the door to disastrous and fatal separations.

Thus it would seem, the Preacher was right (Eccl 1:2-11), but then, how little does it matter to those who cannot or willfully refuse to suffer the rigors required of reading? Where does the fault rest? It is far too easy to cast shadows over this or that, to blame the education system, or the educators, or distractive technologies, or the dissolution of the family. It is not one thing or another, it is more than one thing all together.

Perhaps, though, the culprit behind our "great decline" can better be explained as a moral lapse, that we are and have been for quite some time suffering from the burden of low moral expectations. President George W. Bush, in a speech delivered to the NAACP in 2001, spoke of the "soft bigotry of low expectations." While his words were then directed to the disparate treatment of minority students in the classroom, such a sentiment is apropos for all of American society and culture today and for some decades in the past. We no longer reach for the stars, we demand the stars not shine so bright; we no longer dream big, we have nightmares; we no longer worship Almighty God, we design our own god in our image and likeness.

We hear it all the time now, it has become the siren call of the bewitched and besotted: find "your truth," believe in yourself, determine for yourself who you are and what you want to be, believe in yourself, don't allow anyone to shame or belittle you.

Such self-promotion is self-indulgence run amok. Distracted by technologies and the “soft bigotry of low expectations,” we have killed or lost the strong work ethic, the motivation to succeed, and the social skills that were once the pride of the American spirit. Instead of aspiring for something greater, or accepting challenges as opportunities for growth, or finding the beauty and goodness in all that surrounds us and thanking our Creator for the bounty he has bestowed we close our minds and spend our days in squalid mindlessness playing video games, watching drivel on YouTube, trivial nonsense on television, and educating ourselves on social media with the rants and vitriol of anonymous narcissists needing their daily fix of delusive self-importance.

And yet, things are much worse than what at first appears. Pornography, cohabitation, casual sex, excessive drinking, and drug abuse have become commonplace, justified in the name of moral relativism. Out of wedlock pregnancy no longer stigmatized but normalized. God has been dismissed and forgotten. Things that were once unthinkable are now normalized in the name of individual self-defined identity and lifestyle choice. All must be accepted, dissent and criticism no longer allowed.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, critical life skills are no longer taught and education has become moribund. Students—loosely defined as those unprepared for further education—pursue a college degree of their choice—often self-defined—only to discover them useless. Upon obtaining degrees in

such august pursuits as gender or ethnic studies, cultural anthropology, or cosmic tree-hugging, former students complain of the poverty of employment opportunities and that they are not paid the same as doctors or lawyers or science professionals. Of course, all the while they accept no responsibility for the choices which led them to the wrong side of income inequality.

Reading scores among high school seniors have experienced a steady decline in the years since 1992, and one has to ask why? Is it possible that the decline is the result of diminished rigor in high school curriculum? Annie Holmquist suggests that that might well be the case. By comparing a curriculum manual for Texas high schools from 1922 with those for the 2015-16 school year, she was able to offer a reasonable hypothesis.

Both syllabi included recommendations for poetry, fiction, short stories, drama, and non-fiction. Both syllabi implied that the books on the lists were simply suggestions, which might not necessarily be used in their entirety.

To give an idea of the difference between the two, I plugged the fiction titles from both lists into a text analyzer which measures reading difficulty. The results? Reading material in today’s freshman literature classes measures around a 5th grade level. In 1922, however, freshman literature fare often measured at an 11th or 12th grade level.¹

A few years earlier (2016), Holmquist had compared the middle school (7th & 8th Grade) reading list from a 1908 Minnesota curriculum manual to that of one of the Twin Cities finest districts to

examine whether the common accusation that current education standards were dumbed down was true. In her comparison she noticed three important differences between the reading content of the two eras.

The first difference she found was in publication age. Over half of the titles were at least 20 years old in 1908, with many of them averaging between 50 to 100 years old. In comparison, of the titles on the newer reading list, only four were more than 20 years old.

Older is not necessarily better, but the books on the first list [1908] suggest that schools of the past were more likely to give their students time-tested, classic literature, rather than books whose popularity may happen to be a passing fad.²

The second difference between the two book lists were the themes they explored. The books from the 1908 list are full of historical references and settings stretching from ancient Greece (*Tanglewood Tales*) to the Middle Ages (*Harold, Last of Saxon Kings*) to the founding of America (*Courtship of Miles Standish*). The list contained works by highly recognized authors (Longfellow, Stevenson, Kipling and Dickens) whose works introduced the student to “themes crucial to understanding the foundation upon which America and western civilization were built.”

The newer list, by contrast, deals with modern history for the most part, focusing on many current political and cultural themes such as the Taliban (*The Breadwinner*), cloning, illegal immigrants, the drug war (*The House of*

the Scorpion), and deeply troubled youth (*Touching Spirit Bear*). As Holmquist notes:

In terms of longstanding, classic authors, Mark Twain and Ray Bradbury are the only ones who stand out.

It's good for children to understand the world in which they live, but as with any area in life, you can have too much of a good thing. A continual focus on modern literature narrows the lens through which children can view and interpret the world. Would it not be better to broaden their horizons and expose them to a balance of both old and new literature?

The third difference—and to my mind the most crucial—was in the reading level. Holmquist observed that many of the current list of books used fairly simple, understandable language and vocabulary familiar to the modern young reader. She cited the first paragraph of *Nothing But the Truth*, by the single-named author Avi as an example.

Coach Jamison saw me in the hall and said he wanted to make sure I'm trying out for the track team!!!! Said my middle school gym teacher told him I was really good!!!! Then he said that with me on the Harrison High team we have a real shot at being county champs. Fantastic!!!! He wouldn't say that unless he meant it. Have to ask folks about helping me get new shoes. Newspaper route won't do it all. But Dad was so excited when I told him what Coach said that I'm sure he'll help.

She then offered the first paragraph of Longfellow's *Evangeline* as an example from the 1908 reading list.

This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks, bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight, stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic, stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms. Loud from its rocky caverns, the deep-voiced neighboring ocean speaks, and in accents disconsolate answers the wail of the forest.

Holmquist follows this with her own observation and a challenge.

The first example uses simple words and a casual sentence structure, while the second uses a rich vocabulary and a complex writing format. Naturally, some might look at the second selection and say, "Good grief! How do you expect a child to understand that!?"

But that's the whole point. Unless we give our students challenging material to dissect, process, and study, how can we expect them to break out of the current poor proficiency ratings and advance beyond a basic reading level?

My takeaway from this comparison? It's great that schools today have students read contemporary literature. But we still need to make sure that students also read good literature from the past and are sufficiently challenged.

Obviously, it follows that those who cannot or do not read with any degree of frequency or proficiency, will carry their poverty over into their writing skills. This is reflected in that only 27% of American 8th and 12th grade students have proficiency in writing. The question, again, is why? There may be multiple answers to the question but perhaps the best answer can be found in a 1977 textbook *A First Book in Writing*

English by Dr. Edwin Lewis. According to Dr. Lewis, there are three principles essential to the writing process, which American schools, students, and adults regularly violate.

The first principle is a direct result of not reading high quality literature, as previously noted.

One of the quickest ways of learning to know good English, is oral reading. For him who would write the language it is therefore a great economy to learn to read it. It is an invaluable habit to read aloud every day some piece of prose with the finest feeling the reader can lend to it. In no other way can one so easily learn to notice and to remember new words. In no other way can one catch the infinitely varied rhythm of prose, and acquire a sense of how a good sentence rises gradually from the beginning and then descends in a cadence. This rise and fall of the sentence is not merely a matter of voice; it is a matter of thought as well. ...

If the student reads aloud from writers whose work was natural, unforced, original, he will gradually come to see his own ideas more clearly, feel his own feelings more keenly.³

The second principle which modern writers frequently offend is that in our fast-paced Internet world, we have become skimmers, we seldom, if ever, fully read the text; such practice diminishes thought and understanding, two facets essential to good writing.

To gain new words and new ideas, the student must compel himself to read slowly. Impatient to hurry on and learn how the tale or poem ends, many a youth is accustomed

to read so rapidly as to miss the best part of what the author is trying to say. Thoughts cannot be read so rapidly as words. To get at the thoughts and really to retain the valuable expressions, the student must scrutinize and ponder as he reads. Each word must be thoroughly understood; its exact value in the given sentence must be grasped.

And finally, Dr. Lewis noted the importance of memorizing facts, a prominent no-no in this age where creativity and feelings are considered more important. But is this necessarily so?

To the habit of memorizing, many a person is indebted not merely for high thoughts that cheer hours of solitude and that stimulate his own thinking, but for command of words. The degree to which the language of modern writers is derived from a few great authors is startling. Shakespeare's phrases are a part of the tissue of every man's speech to-day. Such writers as Charles Lamb bear Shakespeare's mark on every page. The language of the King James version of the Bible is echoed in modern English prose and poetry. It formed styles so unlike as those of Bunyan, Ruskin, and Abraham Lincoln. Most teachers would declare that a habit of learning Scripture by heart is of incalculable value to a student's English.

To these principles I would add more. Related to the third principle of memorization, I would proffer the importance of increasing one's vocabulary. Online dictionaries and thesaurus are readily accessible and incredibly beneficial for improving both reading and writing skills. If you want to improve in writing proficiency, write of-

ten and read what you write. Check the grammar, the syntax, and the spelling. Nothing marks a writer a poor one more than does fractured grammar, mistakes in syntax and misspelled words.

And yet, with everything that has been said or written, when will we ever learn? Perhaps it is time to reconsider classical education with its openness to questions, particularly those pertaining to morality. Author David Hicks, in comparing traditional to classical education noted a startling difference.

Unlike Aristotle, the modern educator looks upon observation, not reason, as the starting point; and he distrusts the classical school master's tolerance for normative questions and for the use of methods appropriate to such questions, as well as his insistent search for moral content and reasonable form in history, literature, religion, and art. His misgivings stem perhaps from a too lofty regard for the experimentally verifiable or from a lack of sympathy with the goals of the classical teacher, **who is not trying to serve up verifiable facts, but is hoping to engrain in his students the wonderful spirit of inquiry.** Whatever his reasons for rejecting the classical curriculum, his classrooms suffer from its absence in three notable ways. In them, human experience tends to be dealt with narrowly and reductively, broken down into isolated, unconnected units; students ignorant of what questions to ask are presented with uninvited and consequently meaningless information; and there is no basis for making moral and aesthetic judgments or for attaching learning to behavior.⁴ [Emphasis added.]

However, classical education goes further than merely asking questions, for in the classical model of inquiry there is always the necessity to wrestle with the truth, and how the discovered truth applies to normal living.

On the other hand, the classical form of instruction serves a cultural purpose, as well as an intellectual one. It invites the student to adopt for himself his civilization's highest moral and aesthetic values; at the same time, the student learns the rules governing a universal process of inquiry. There is, of course, more than a hint of dogma in any education presuming to pass judgment on the way a person lives and on the way he thinks. Yet a classical education presents the right way, not with the intention of stifling future inquiry, but as a necessary starting point for dialogue. In this sense, dogma can resemble art: it confronts man with some truth about himself, a kind of truth that might have taken him a lifetime of error and misdirection to arrive at for himself, but ultimately, a truth he must test in his own experience of life if he is to appropriate it for himself and benefit from the confrontation.

As one reviewer noted, Hicks correctly described the differences between traditional and classical education in a clear and cogent manner.

Classical education tests its students' assumptions about truth and morality. It may seem like traditional education's approach of presenting students with facts to accept at face value is a far easier proposition, rather than having them wrestle with concepts that may have uncomfortable implications for their life journeys.

Truth is often difficult to decipher. Seldom is truth clearly black or white, but frequently some shade of gray. Emotional truths can hold lies within them. Here is a brief example: a 1997 Washington Post article described a clever science fair project presented by 14-year-old Nathan Zohner.

The chemical compound dihydrogen monoxide (or DHMO) has been implicated in the deaths of thousands of Americans every year, mainly through accidental ingestion. In gaseous form, it can cause severe burns. And, according to a new report, "the dangers of this chemical do not end there."

The chemical is so caustic that it "accelerates the corrosion and rusting of many metals,... is a major component of acid rain, {and} . . . has been found in excised tumors of terminal cancer patients." Symptoms of ingestion include "excessive sweating and urination," and "for those who have developed a dependency on DHMO, complete withdrawal means certain death."

Yet the presence of the chemical has been confirmed in every river, stream, lake and reservoir in America.

Judging from these facts, do you think dihydrogen monoxide should be banned?

Where then is the truth? The truth is cleverly hidden behind unfamiliar terminology; dihydrogen monoxide is more commonly known as water (H₂O). Water (DHMO) does corrode metals, can burn you and can drown you; all verifiably true. The point here is that the truth is not always obvious and often requires critical thinking. As John Stuart Mill so eloquently stated:

He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion... Nor is it enough that he should hear the opinions of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them...he must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form.

According to a recent article, "It is not enough to be able to know your own beliefs; you need to know the other viewpoint as well."

Not so you win an argument either, but so that you may come closer to knowing the truth of a subject and not blinding yourself by only "learning" things that confirm what you already believe. In a world of technology that easily adapts to your confirmation bias, you must guard yourself from an echo chamber that confirms your beliefs. If you are convinced that socialism is the best type of economy, can you articulate arguments for a free-market economy? Likewise, if you are convinced of free-market economics, you should be able to explain and understand why socialism is persuasive.⁵

1. Annie Holmquist, "9th Grade Reading Lists: 1922 vs. Today", Intellectual Takeout, August 30, 2019.
2. Annie Holmquist, "Middle School Reading Lists 100 Years Ago vs. Today", Intellectual Takeout, July 19, 2016.
3. Edwin Lewis, Ph.D., *A First Book in Writing English*, 1897, p. 13.
4. David V. Hicks, "Norms and Nobility: A Treatise on Education", University Press of America, September 30, 1999.
5. Spencer Haven, "It's Not Enough to Know Your Own Beliefs", Intellectual Takeout, September 10, 2019.

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

Salvation

Michael Patrick Barber

Ignatius Press
2019, 189 pages.

Faith and Politics

Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI)

Ignatius Press
2018, 269 pages.

Catholicism & Modernity

James Hitchcock

The Seabury Press
1979, 250 pages.

PERIODICALS

First Things

www.firstthings.com

Touchstone

www.touchstonemag.com

Catholic Answers Magazine

www.catholic.com

Chronicles

www.chroniclesmagazine.org

The National Catholic Register

www.ncregister.com

Our Sunday Visitor

www.osvnews.com

ONLINE

Crisis Magazine

www.crisismagazine.com

The Imaginative Conservative

www.theimaginativeconservative.org

Catholic Exchange

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Intellectual Takeout

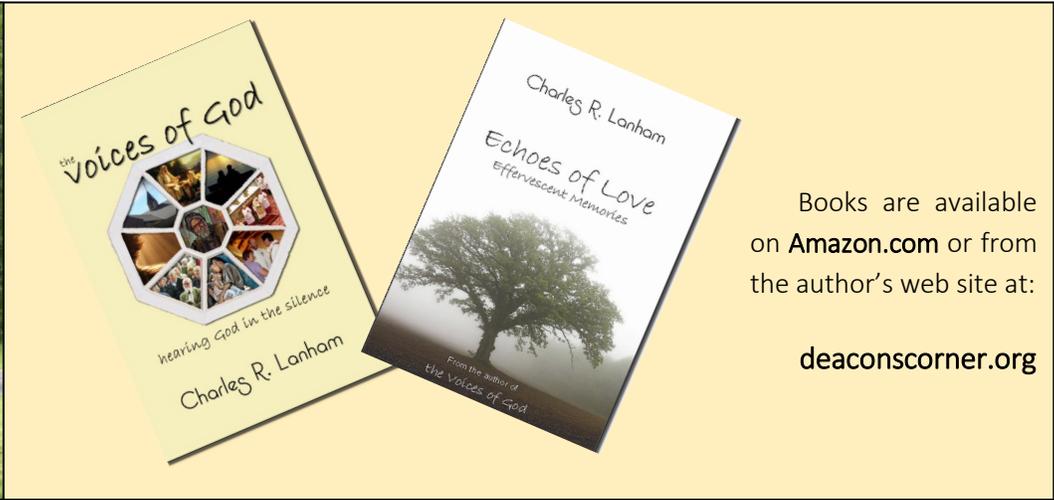
www.intellectuالتakeout.org

Life News

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

He is the author of **The Voices of God: Hearing God in the Silence**, **Echoes of Love: Effervescent Memories** and is currently writing his third book **Without God: Finding God in a Godless World**.

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