

July 31, 2020
Volume 04—Number 43



A journal for restless minds

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A Death of Spirit

Shudder at the thought

There was a time I suspect most will admit when God felt like a stranger far too occupied with managing the universe and all of creation to take poor mention of one wretched soul. For some thirty, thirty-five years wandering among the weeds searching for truth I never thought to engage with him in conversation. It seemed absurdly perverse, perhaps a tad bit mad to consider conversing with God. After all, I had never heard him say a word, never knew God to sit down over a cup of coffee and a donut just to talk about the weather or go on about the latest nonsense out of Congress. That was just not his thing, I thought. The thing is, it took me too long, thirty-five years too long to discover he was very fond of donuts and rather enjoyed a good laugh, especially over my own foolishness. Or as Chesterton would tell us—in point of fact he did, “A sense of humor is the closest thing to the grace of God.”

And as the song goes, I was “lookin’ for love in all the wrong places, lookin’ for love in too many faces, searchin’ their eyes lookin’ for traces of what I’m dreaming of, hoping to find a friend and a lover, I’ll bless the day I discover another heart lookin’ for love.” I eventually discovered what Augustine discovered, that I was looking outside, looking in all the wrong places, rushing headlong toward the lovely things which God had made, never realizing he was with me even though I was not with him. As with Augustine, so also I came to discover that he had been with me all along; in my hubris I was too blind to see, too deaf to hear his voice.

You have called to me, and have cried out, and have shattered my deafness. You have blazed forth with light, and have shone upon me, and you have put my blindness to flight! You have sent forth fragrance, and I have drawn in my breath, and I pant after you. I have

tasted you, and I hunger and thirst after you. You have touched me, and I have burned for your peace.

Like Augustine, I came to pant after God; tasted and hungered and thirsted for more, more, more. I had been starving myself spiritually, never hearing the rales of impending death rattling my soul. Almost too late it seemed I came to know how necessary soul food was for the spirit; how regular conversation and dining at Table were essential for the health and well-being of the soul. When once again I ate and drank and engaged in divine conversation, my soul sang, my heart soared, my spirit was resuscitated,

renewed, revived! I gorged on soul food, I heard his voice, I danced with angels, and my spirit burned with the unquenchable fire of his love.



Some will call me mad; they could be right, if only by the measure, for each comes into this world with a touch of madness. Some will say I am become fanatical; they would be right for the most part, for I have come to “see everything, everything that there is.” Gabriel Syme, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, discovers at the end two of the deepest of all theological mysteries: the freedom of the will and the existence of massive, irrational evil. Free will is symbol-

ized by anarchism, man’s freedom to do wicked things, and as Augustine and other theologians have noted, anarchism is the price we pay for freedom.

Syme sprang to his feet, shaking from head to foot.

“I see everything,” he cried, “everything that there is. Why does each thing on the earth war against each other thing? Why does each small thing in the world have to fight against the world itself? Why does a fly have to fight the whole universe? Why does a dandelion have to fight the whole universe? For the same reason that I had to be alone in the dreadful Council of the Days. So that each thing that obeys law may have the glory and isolation of the anarchist. So that each man fighting for order may be as brave and good a man as the dynamiter. So that the real lie of Satan may be flung back in the face of the blasphemer, so that by tears and torture we

may earn the right to say to this man, 'You lie!' No agonies can be too great to buy the right to say to this accuser, 'We also have suffered.'

"It is not true that we have never been broken. We have been broken upon the wheel. It is not true that we have never descended from these thrones. We have descended into hell. We were complaining of unforgettable miseries even at the very moment when this man entered insolently to accuse us of happiness. I repel the slander; we have not been happy. I can answer for every one of the great guards of Law whom he has accused."¹

It is free will that enables us to choose, to make a choice whether order or anarchy. "If our behavior were entirely determined by how our brain is wired by heredity and environment, then we would be mere automatons with no more genuine free will or self-awareness—two names for the same thing—than a vacuum cleaner. But we are not automatons. We have a knowledge of good and evil and a freedom to choose, within limits, of course, between the two."² Thus, we are free, but at the price of Christ crucified, and we shudder at the thought.

I am struck by the vacuousness of an empty cross. Some have asked why the Catholic Church insists on placing the horror of the crucifixion—*crucis Corpus Christi*—front and center near the altar of his magnificent sacrifice. Why not an empty tomb with perhaps a stone rolled away to celebrate the resurrection? Brent Forrest has the perfect answer, "Honesty in advertising." There is nothing, nothing to be gained and everything to lose from hiding what was won for us through such cruel sacrifice. Without *Corpus Christi*, the *crucis* is but two rough boards bound together; without Christ crucified, there would be no need for an altar, no purpose for resurrection, nothing but an empty tomb. "Feel good Christianity works fine until it is no longer possible to feel good." Not surprising, we no longer feel good.

The coming peril is the intellectual, educational, psychological and artistic overproduction, which, equally with economic overproduction, threatens the wellbeing of contemporary civilization. People are inundated, blinded, deafened, and mentally paralyzed by a flood of vulgar and tasteless externals, leaving them no time for leisure, thought, or creation from within themselves.³

Chesterton's language indicates that overstimulation prevents people from interacting with the world around

them. They are "blinded, deafened, mentally paralyzed." The inundation of "events" happening around us prevents us from reflecting appropriately upon them, which ultimately stifles our ability to understand and express them in language that is distinctly ours. For those who desire to be a relevant voice, all analysis is time-sensitive, and speed threatens to short-circuit the creative process of fitting the right words to our thoughts and reflections.

This, of course, is a kinder explanation for the global pandemic of the highly infectious, though seldom fatal, viral Foot-and-Mouth disease, a condition otherwise known as "Open mouth, insert foot." Truth is, we seldom stop to think. We have forgotten that our souls will die for want of silence, solitude, and reflection. Thinking is necessary, it is part of our DNA, it is what differentiates us from other living creatures. To think requires us to set aside the need for more information and reflect deeply and honestly on the world in a way that will keep the foot as far from the mouth as practicable. It means ensuring we recognize the danger inherent in overproduction—that we will impoverish our own souls and contribute to an ultimately meaningless and powerless chatter.

When I was young, I used to be a know-it-all, but now that I am much older, though unnecessarily the wiser, I know I do not know it all; in truth there are a great many things of which I do not know the questions, let alone their answers. It is perhaps the bane of modern thought to put the answer before the question, the cart before the horse, to know a thing without the knowing of it.

I have come to understand the ease with which "You are mad!" rolls off the waggish tongue; it requires neither thought nor reason, just an immediate, irrational, emotional response. It adds nothing to the conversation, a knife to the heart would be no more lethal. My thoughts from Monday reflected this: "Rational argument, honest debate, logic and reason have gone extinct! As gone as the dinosaur, the dodo, and some sightless bug you never knew nor cared existed. Irrational rant, mockery, and insult appear to be the only games in town, enjoyed by the tidal swamp of moral morons and intellectual cowards safely barricaded behind their thumbs on Facebook, Twitter, and whatever else falls under the category of

anti-social media.

Whenever people mock and that is all they do, I know they don't know how to deal with it intellectually. For if you can demolish an argument intellectually, why would you use mockery? Mockery may make you feel good, but it is not persuasive. You have not used reason, you have used insult and the like, but it is not an argument. ~ Dennis Prager

Much is made of "modern" science, of the urgent necessity to trust the science betwixt and between commonsense and uncommon fear. But, as one wise grandmother told her young grandson, "'modern' only means what is currently in fashion." Hence, the term "modern science" has no binding authority. If you doubt that simply check out any magazine or newspaper from the 1950s: *Modern Fashion, Modern Science, Modern Economics, Modern Psychiatry, Modern Family*, the list goes on and on. Modern science has proven itself wrong more often than right; that is the nature of science whether ancient, medieval, modern, or post-modern. Science seeks answers to questions, good science questions the answers, bad science questions the questions.

We are in an age of trial and tribulation, no worse than any other age, for every age comes with its own toils and troubles. You would think we could learn from our previous mistakes. You would think so, but you would be mistaken; we humans refuse to learn from past mistakes, we either ignore or erase them from our "modern" collective memory. Modern people use "modern" to weaponize their argument, to "cancel" disagreeable thought and thinkers with whom they cannot nor dare not agree. Few could argue the cancel culture any less than persecution, though not as cruel perhaps as feeding Christians to the lions or losing one's head to the guillotine or terrorist. The end is all too much the same. Christians and all people of faith are suffering persecution under the heels of tyrants who never ask the question, "What god do you serve?" for they know the answer. "Leaving the question unasked renders the motives of the persecution unknown, and the modern Tyrant prefers it that way."

In days of old, the persecuted Christian, called to appear before the emperor or to stand upon the scaffold, at least received the dignity of professing his belief before execution. In modern times, however, the perse-

cuted Christian often faces a nameless and faceless tyrant. Today, the martyr typically suffers for his belief behind closed doors, in prison camps, in back alleyways, at the hands of a persecutor who wants to leave no trace of his hateful deed. St. John Paul II called many of these contemporary, hidden witnesses "the new martyrs."

One of the most gripping modern examples comes to us from the canonization of the saint and martyr, Edith Stein (Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, O.C.D., which provides searing commentary on the insidious nature of the persecution of Christians in recent times.

As the official *Positio* [Presentation] regarding the martyrdom of St. Edith Stein explains, however, "Although the Church must not too easily confer the title of martyr, she must neither on the other hand give advantage to the modern 'Tyrants' who, with their sophisticated machinations and their evil tricks, seek to eliminate not only the Catholic faith but also martyrdom, rendering the Church and her witnesses completely *mute*."

The silent witness of modern persecuted Christians reminds us of that very first group of souls slaughtered wholesale in hatred of the Christ: the Holy Innocents. Voiceless and unable to cry out to Heaven, they were, nonetheless, eliminated in an effort to stamp out Christ from this earth. ... Like these very first voiceless martyrs of the Church, our modern martyrs suffer without the privilege of asserting their credo courageously, aloud.

Our church doors are now closed. And perhaps for the first time, many of us feel sharply what it's like when a government shuts down divine worship. But is it only New York, Chicago, and London that are appalling? What of the closed church doors in Damascus and Baghdad? What about the fate of Christians in the dark alleyways of Mosul? Or over broad expanses in China?

The faceless Tyrant wreaks his havoc, and those who disappear, or whose remains are found among the rubble in these too often forgotten corners of the earth, have not had their moment of profession before the pagan emperor. Theirs is a silent witness.

Yet this mute witness is no less powerful for its silence. Their silence speaks, cries out to be heard, and resounds through the corridors of Heaven.

The closing of our churches, unchecked, virtually without a whimper, should open our eyes and ears to threats against the faith in other contexts, egregious acts against belief, both far away and close to home.

Martyrdom knows no geographic or chronological boundaries. From the Holy Innocents to the shuttered churches in Beijing, martyrdom is "the supreme witness

given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2473)

It is Christ who speaks through our silent witness. The only thing we should fear is ceding power to Tyrants by accepting their redefinition of the rules of witness and martyrdom. To live as Christians without fear and, if necessary, to lay down our lives despite the *odium fidei*, the hatred of the faith, is the vocation of our generation of believers.

We have seen the faith persecuted from within our own church walls. We have seen the inestimable truth and goodness of the Eucharist denied, denigrated, and desecrated. We have, in great part, stood silent. That must end. We have to acknowledge and aid the persecuted, wherever they are, even in our midst.

We must reject, in all its forms, the cunning persecution which gives no name to its action and no face to its decrees, thus hiding its motives, and concealing its effect. We must refuse to permit such a redefinition of reality, such a muting of the Church, her fundamental truths, and her courageously loving witness – which is to say the voice of Christ.⁴

Many Americans see things differently, believing or at least outwardly expressing a less pessimistic view, believing those in government—and by their silent and public acquiescence, the majority of episcopal conferences and their ministers—have their best interests in mind. To paraphrase Sherlock Holmes, “I believe there is a new humanism afoot” which raises more fundamental questions considering all the disastrous ideologies, such as socialism, which resulted in the enslavement and death of hundreds of millions of fellow human beings.

“The problem begins, as all deep problems do, with theology.” No one, especially those who should but find it politically inconvenient, wants to mention religion, theology, or God; there is a phrase for that: politically incorrect. No one fears God anymore, but they are afraid to mention him outside of blasphemy.

During a 2019 papal visit to Abu Dhabi, Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyab signed a document which immediately erupted in controversy over the phrase: “The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God.”

This seems pure religious indifferentism, the kind of

thing popes once reflexively warned against. A Vatican spokesman and the pope later claimed that this phrase refers to God’s “permissive will” – he allows things to happen that he doesn’t will positively. The context – color, sex, and race – God-willed things, however, belied that argument.

But the problems begin much earlier in the document: “Through faith in God, who has created the universe, creatures and all human beings (equal on account of his mercy), believers are called to express this human fraternity by safeguarding creation and the entire universe and supporting all persons, especially the poorest and those most in need.”

As a general statement and, in particular, an effort to stop violence between Muslims and other faiths, this might pass muster. But something larger than the perennially-delayed age of global “human fraternity” seems in play.

The involvement of population controllers like Jeffrey Sachs and Bill Gates, China and the U.N., in this Global Education Pact tells a tale.

Many Christians balk at the very idea of humanism, and rightly, because it’s often a vehicle for a hard secularism. But Catholics, who believe in Faith and Reason, in a Savior who became true man so that we can become what God intended, cannot ignore authentic human things. That would be a kind of radical Lutheranism, rejecting reason and human effort in favor of *sola fide*, a kind of blind faith.

Christian humanism must begin with Christ and the Trinity. As Chesterton once wrote, the first pages of the Bible tell us God created Eve because it was not good for man to be alone. (As the lockdown has, doubtless, confirmed in millions of homes.) But, said GKC, Trinitarian doctrine suggests that it’s not good even for God to be alone. The very heart of personhood, even divine personhood, is to be in relation to other persons.

Human beings “participate” – to use a precise theological term – in that divine life; we’re all part of Christ’s Mystical Body. (If that seems abstract, Jesus explained in [the] Gospel, “you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you” (Jn. 14:20). Without that, what we call human and humanism will be radically untethered – false – to the deepest of realities.

We can see how this plays out in other religions and philosophies. Ancient Stoicism, which has had a modern rebirth, is a stern school that, for all its attractions, is largely inhuman. Stoics didn’t believe that individuals survived death but – in its most typical expression – that we simply endure evil “stoically” since we all inevitably dissipate into the original Fire of Reason. For Hinduism and Buddhism, the world is illusion, not

Creation. Different views of what the world is lead to very different ways of acting.

A Christian humanism may easily converse with Judaism; the early Church acknowledged that Jews worship the same Father who fully reveals Himself as the Trinity in the New Testament.

But Islam not only rejects the Trinity, in some instances violently. It rewrites both Old and New Testaments in ways that, truth be told, have no historical warrant.

And secularism today largely consists in viewing the “descent of man,” as Darwin deliberately put it, as the evolution of a complex animal with reduced emphasis on anything higher.

Commonweal magazine recently published a telling article about the once-dominant philosophy of Harvard professor John Rawls. Greatly simplified, Rawls asked readers to imagine that they were operating behind a “veil of ignorance.” If you didn’t know whether you’d be born male or female, black or white, gay or straight, what laws would you establish?

This sounds like a formula for impartiality but, even ignoring the philosophical problems with the theory (not our subject here), the *Commonweal* writer recalls how, in graduate school, if a question was raised about, say, how the principles should protect babies in the womb, the usual white liberal pieties towards women’s rights simply cut off discussion.

What looked like an impartial methodology was actually a way to sprinkle holy water on positions dear to late -20th-century liberal ideology.

There are parallel problems with the “new humanism” that the Vatican is promoting. If you think it’s an easy-going method for the global spread of quasi-Christian principles, existing divisions within and among nations and faiths will quickly show it’s not. Believers in other gods have quite different aims from the peaceful co-existence imagined by Vatican optimists – as is most starkly visible in the anti-Christian outrages that have occurred following Rome’s still-secret accord with China.

As St. Augustine saw 1500 years ago, “Rational life ... does not owe its excellence to itself, but to the truth that it willingly obeys.” If Truth is a matter of indifference, we won’t get a “new” humanism, but something older, and far worse.⁵

Vaclav Havel’s *The Power of the Powerless* should become required reading for all. Havel described life in 1970s Communist Eastern Europe as “post-totalitarian,” not because the system was not totalitarian, but because

the *way* the totalitarianism was exercised in society was radically different from the totalitarianism of dictators like Hitler and Mao. Havel described a post-totalitarian world thus:

Within the system, every individual is trapped within a dense network of the state’s governing instruments ... themselves legitimated by a flexible but comprehensive ideology, a “secularized religion”. ... it is therefore necessary to see that power relations ... are best described as a labyrinth of influence, repression, fear and self-censorship which swallows up everyone within it, at the very least by rendering them silent, stultified and marked by some undesirable prejudices of the powerful.

Perhaps Havel’s most famous example was the greengrocer who displays in his shop window the sign “Workers of the world, unite!” –not because he is especially interested in the workers of the world, but because failure to do so would signal an impermissible disobedience from the ruling ideology of the society. Those who would enforce obedience upon him, refusing to tolerate any failure to display the required sign of submission, are no more concerned for the “workers of the world” than the greengrocer. But they will report him and see him punished to show that they remain faithful adherents of the ruling ideology, even though the greengrocer is himself one of those workers for whom they claim concern. It seems too familiar to ignore.

I must confess to a certain madness. Once I sat with God over coffee and a donut; we talked and spoke of many things. We still talk but the intimacy we shared has been denied by a mandatory masquerade. The doors to his house no longer welcome those who are most in need of his divine mercy. His Sacraments are cruelly denied by those ordained to shepherd his people. Whether out of timidity, moral indifference, or callous cupidity I am not of any mind to reveal. My spirit is weak, I hear the rales of death returning and I fear mightily for my soul. Oh, dearest God, hear my prayer!

1. G.K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, (Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith, 1907); special annotated edition by Martin Gardner, (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1999), 262-63.
2. G.K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 9.
3. G.K. Chesterton, from a speech in the 1930s.
4. Elizabeth A. Mitchell, *Recognizing Our Mute Witnesses*, The Catholic Thing—<https://www.thecatholicthing.org>, May 2, 2020.

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: What Every Catholic Should Know

Michael Patrick Barber

Ignatius Press

2019, 189 pages.

Faith and Politics

Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI)

Ignatius Press

2018, 269 pages.

The Day Is Now Far Spent

Robert Cardinal Sarah

Ignatius Press

2019, 350 pages.

G.K. Chesterton Collected Works: Volume XXXVI

The Illustrated London News 1932-1934

Ignatius Press

2011, 613 pages.

Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism and the future of the West

R. R. Reno

Regnery Gateway

2019, 182 pages.

The Irony of Modern Catholic History:

How the Church rediscovered itself

George Weigel

Basic Books

2019, 322 pages.

Letters on Liturgy

Father Dwight Longenecker

Angelico Press

2020, 164 pages.

Immortal Combat

Father Dwight Longenecker

Sophia Institute Press

2020, 144 pages.

PERIODICALS

First Things

www.firstthings.com

Touchstone

www.touchstonemag.com

Catholic Answers Magazine

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Catholic Herald

www.catholicherald.co.uk

Chronicles

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Crisis Magazine

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Catholic Exchange

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Life News

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Catholic Vote

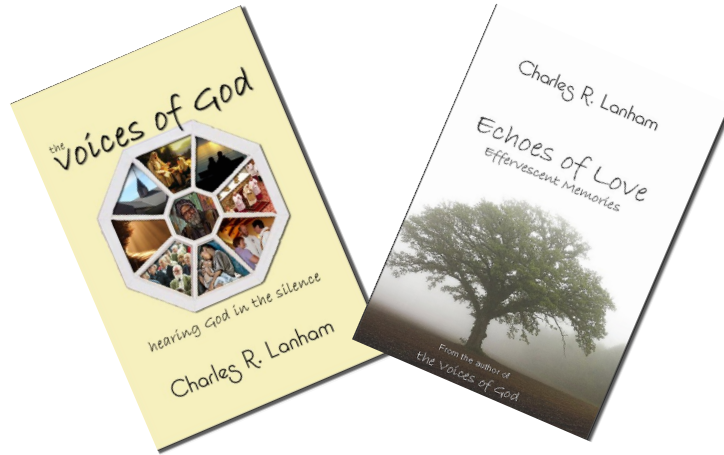
www.catholicvote.org

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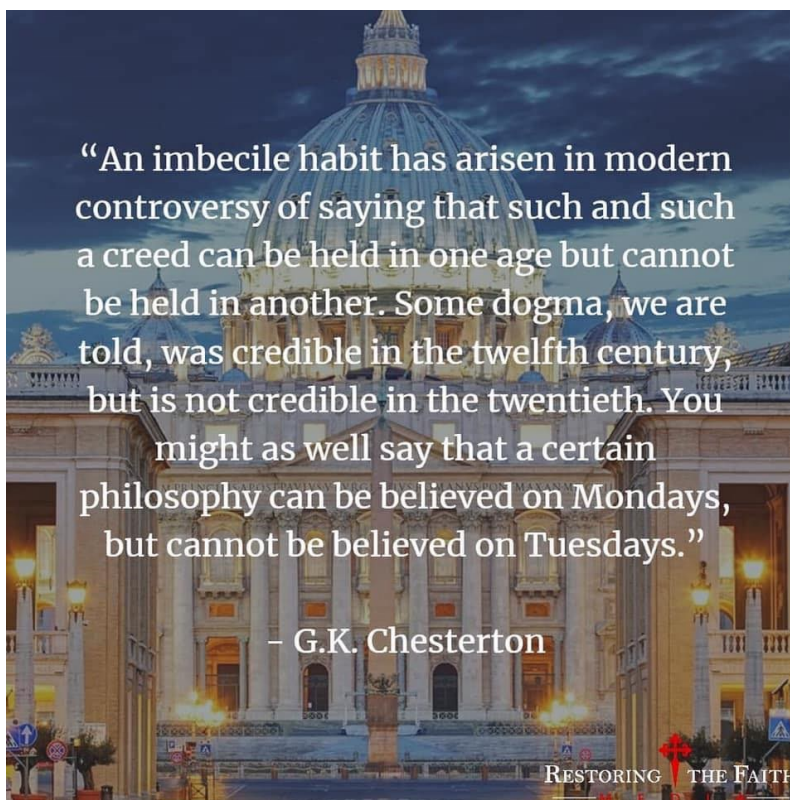
Books are available on **Amazon.com** or from the author's web site at:

deaconscorner.org

Deacon Chuck Lanham is a Catholic author, columnist, speaker, theologian and philosopher, a jack-of-all-trades like his father (though far from a master of anything) 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 has written over 500 essays on religion, faith, morality, theology, and philosophy.

Deacon Chuck can be contacted thru email at

deacon.chuck@deaconscorner.org



Colloquī, the present infinitive of *colloquor* (Latin: *to talk, to discuss or to converse*) 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! Essays may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the expressed intent to seek the Truth, the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth, so help us God.

Colloquī is published weekly by Deacon's Corner Publishing. Each issue of **Colloquī** is available online: <https://deaconscorner.org>

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