

Colloquī

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A journal for restless minds

Squandered Wisdom

A plague of fools

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.

Squandered Wisdom

A plague of fools

There is a difference—a chasmic divide—between well-read and reading well enough so to plague unwary fools. It is the plague of self-infected unknowing that will ultimately destroy us. The faux euphoria from a fevered brow too quickly passes; left is but the empty shell, knowing nothing than before which was, after all, nothing much at all.

Being well-read is much more than reading romance novels, pulp fiction or graphic comic books, more than leafing through magazines and newspapers at the grocery or drugstore checkout. Well-read requires serious mental effort to understand the meaning of the words written upon the page, or as the Hungarian-born American historian John Lukas once wrote, "In the begin-

ning was the Word. (Not the picture. Or the number.)"

[W]ords are not the symbols of things: They are symbols of meanings. And the meaning of meaning is that it carries our minds not only deeper, but further. Meaning is not mechanical or determined; it is spiritual and teleological. It is no longer sufficient for us to recall that the Greek word "logos" means both "word" and "reason." We may have to understand that our recognition of the word as a symbol of meaning amounts to an enrichment of our reasoning.¹



Lukas went on to note that as an historian he often shocked his students (and even some colleagues) by saying that

history does not consist of facts but of words about facts, because no "fact" has any meaning by itself. The meaning of any and every "fact" depends on our immediate association of it with other facts; moreover, its

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Meaning also, and inevitably, depends on our statement (or call it “phrasing”) of it—whence there are statements in which the “fact” may be precise but its meaning may be untrue. And so the finding of the *mot juste* is the inevitable task not only of the poet or the novelist but of the historian, too, since his selection of every word is not only a scientific or aesthetic but also a moral choice.

Scott Richert, a long-time acquaintance and friend, reflecting on how important Lukacs work was to his own intellectual development, observes that Lukacs’ writing not only influenced his own historical consciousness and his understanding of philosophy and theology but beyond that, his very choice of words and the construction of sentences. He also learned that every action, no matter how small, is a moral choice, and that includes the words we use and our intentions in using them.

“[T]he purpose of the historian,” Lukacs wrote in *Historical Consciousness*, “should be the reduction of untruth.” But in that purpose the historian should be no different than the rest of us—or rather, we should be no different from him. The great tragedy here at the end of the modern age is the widespread loss of concern for the truth and the consequent degradation of language. According to Lukacs, if the words we choose aren’t consciously designed to reveal the truth as best we understand it, then they will conceal it—intentionally or unintentionally. One does not have to immerse oneself in our degraded political rhetoric to see the reality of Lukacs insight. In this age of social media, we float in a sea of words that are used, not to draw us closer

to the truth, but to create alternate unrealities.²

There is something decidedly degrading to becoming well-read. In this advanced technological age of social media, digital assistants, avatars and virtual reality, reading has become a banal mundanity, a waste of time. Our minds have become atrophied, vestigial masses of amorphous goo serving no discernible purpose. We are less than machines, more than automatons, not quite so human as God—supposing he exists—intended. Once, we were made in the image and likeness of God; in our denial we have returned ourselves to clay, remolding ourselves in the image and likeness of what?—whatever we choose, we alone decide. We are cyclops with monocular vision, one-dimensional and color blind; adamantly refusing to break surface tension. We are drowning in our own mud, unable to see the truth through the muck of it.

In an allegorical tale perhaps best known as the *Ship of Fools*, the Greek philosopher, Plato, described a vessel populated by deranged, frivolous, 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. This should concern us for it falls much too close for comfort.

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. Even when confronted by the truth we refuse to deny our preconceptions. Mark Twain once quipped, “Truth is stranger than

fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn’t.”

Again, in another allegory, *The Myth of the Cave*, Plato imagined humanity chained within a darkened cave with nothing but shadows and illusions flickering upon a wall to define their reality. One man escaped his bonds, traveled beyond the darkness of the cave, and looked upon the sun and saw the world as it truly was. When he returned and told the others of what he had seen and experienced they refused to believe. His truth must be mere fantasy, a delusion, the ravings of a madman, and thus, summarily dismissed. They simply denied his experience. It could not be, for they *knew* the chains and the amusing images on the wall were reality.

Thus 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.”³

Yogi Berra, infamous for his malapropisms, once quipped “Sometimes you can see a whole lot of things just by looking.” Sadly, most of us find ourselves doing a whole lot of looking without a whole lot of seeing. The truth is there is more to seeing than having good eyesight for too often we fail to see because we simply refuse to see what is directly in front of us. What we see, what we believe we see, is too often absent truth.

This malady—which affects not only the eyes but the ears as well—is part and parcel of the human condition. The Lord God has been telling us so for a very, very long time. According to Jeremiah who lived six centuries before Christ, the Lord told him to say to his people: “Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not, who have ears, but hear not” (Jeremiah 5:21).

The sixteenth-century English writer, John Heywood, subsequently borrowed from this passage when he coined the proverb “There are none so blind as those who will not see.” It is as true today as it was then. We delude ourselves into seeing only what we want to see and hearing only what we want to hear. It is often and rightly said that a blind man may still have the possibility of seeing, but a man with good eyes who refuses to see surely cannot.

The prevailing “wisdom” which relegates God to ancient myth and folklore is much like the mosquito: annoying in its persistent whining, its injury unremarked until the swelling and the itch. Common remedies relieve the irritation but do nothing for what has been taken or the evil left behind. 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 subjectively focused on “I” which quite clearly dismisses the inconsequential existence of *not* “I”. Only “I” am relevant, all else is of no import, entering the conscious mind only to the extent that it is relative to the all-important “I”.

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.

What makes this so terribly appalling is that we appear to have lost the ability or desire to be horrified by any of it. We have become dead to life; over-

whelmed 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 groupthink, 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 vestige of that humanity which has been gifted to him by God.

When God becomes myth, the devil laughs. Those who would argue there is no God will likewise argue there is no devil for if there is no Good there can be no Evil. It is easy to be good when there is no evil. Steve Bollman, founder and president of Paradisus Dei and the developer of *That Man is You!* illustrates this from personal experience. Prior to 2002, Steve was a professional energy derivatives trader in Houston, Texas. At a business meeting, over dinner and far too much alcohol, one trader claimed to be a “good man.” The others at the table argued over how he could make such a claim, what objective standards could he apply to justify his being a “good man.”

Someone suggested using the Ten Commandments as an objective test. Steve was the only one at the table who knew all ten and in their proper order. The *good* man? He admitted to honestly observing two: IV—*Honor thy father and thy mother* and V—*Thou shall not kill*, but only with certain exclusions for abortion, euthanasia, suicide, contraception, etc. Bollman remarks

further that the average for the group, excluding himself, was 2.5 with half having broken number VI—*Thou shalt not commit adultery*.

Without God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—at its core, life as we understand it, becomes nothing more than 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 deliberately and surgically excised from the calculus: 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, absolute nonsense.

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.

We have squandered wisdom in our conceit. We have been overcome by a plague, a plague of fools who,

having drunk from the devil's cup, have locked themselves from within so as to deny the light of truth. Perhaps the best description of the fool can be found in *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis, where he puts forth the idea that the foolish make a conscious choice that leads to their own destruction as persons, where they become unpersons in hell, not annihilated but in some stage of disintegration. The great theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar—who an acquaintance insists has read everything that can be read—says of C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, "That is the greatest book on heaven and hell that's been written."

In *The Great Divorce* a bus goes from hell to the outskirts of heaven, in this kind of purgatory. It's the opportunity for these people to come on in or not. In one scene George MacDonald pleads with this fellow, "Accept the mercy."

"I don't want any bloody mercy," the man says.

"Oh, yes, accept the bloody mercy," MacDonald replies.

Somewhere in the book there's this classic statement: At the end of time there will be those who say to God, "Thy will be done", and those to whom God says, "Thy will be done."

Yes, if you're in hell it's because you've chosen to be there, but the interesting thing is that hell at the beginning of the book is described as this place where everyone is moving farther and farther apart because no one wants to be near anybody. It's solitude, it's being on your own [in the vastness of space].

Yet when the bus goes up to heaven they find out it's just a little crack in, you know, the land. But it's infinitesimal so that there's something. And for heaven Lewis has

this beautiful image, which he admits he got from someone else, that everything is heavier than on earth. When you're trying to walk on the grass, it punches your feet. You put your hand in the water and it gets bruised because water is like rock-solid. Raindrops or dewdrops are like big blocks. So Lewis is trying to make the point that heaven is more real, more solid, more concrete, heavier, weightier than earth, and that therefore hell is less.⁴

Our one dimensional thinking, exacerbated by our unwillingness to being well-read, severely limits us to know the truth. We no longer have the energy or the drive necessary to determine what is truth. We no longer know the difference between good and evil. We have no complaints about sin for we no longer look either toward heaven or hell for guidance on the matter.

I don't want—and I certainly don't need—a church to tell me that whatever I want to do, or whatever I feel like doing, is right. I need a church to tell me when something I may happen to want to do is wrong. I don't need help rationalizing bad behavior. I'm good at that. I need help resisting the temptation to rationalize bad behavior. While I'm glad to be reassured that God loves me despite my moral failings, I'm even more grateful to be reminded that my moral failings ARE moral failings and that I am in need of God's mercy and forgiveness. I need to be told to "go, and sin no more.—Robert P. George

Over years of helping couples prepare for marriage, I have learned to emphasize what marriage is and what it is not. The most telling discussion inevitably comes when asked, "what might end your marriage?"

Now, that is a loaded question to be sure, but a key to understanding what marriage truly means to the two persons soon to become one flesh. What athlete would accept defeat before the race begins? What general would surrender without first engaging the enemy? What student would take a course intending to fail? If before the marriage, a couple considers its ending, is that not the same? Some may suggest it is being realistic, but in truth, it is choosing hell over heaven. It is admitting guilt before sin, a prenuptial agreement to the dissolvability of marriage on mutually agreed terms, forget God's terms.

Recently, I read an essay, *Reclaiming the Forgotten Wisdom of a Bygone Era*, by Anthony Esolen, Professor and Writer in Residence at Northeast Catholic College in Warner, New Hampshire. He writes of discovering, while restoring an old Victorian house that was once a rectory, a book *Talking to Teenagers* by Father F. H. Drinkwater, originally published in 1954 with material the author notes that dates back to the 1930s. Esolen relates a conversation, one which Father Drinkwater imagines, between two girls coming back from seeing a double feature at the cinema.

"That last one was a good picture, wasn't it?" says Doris. "Weren't you glad she was able to get a divorce and marry that writer-fellow?"

"No," says Nora. "I'm afraid I don't believe in divorce."

"Oh, but it all depends, doesn't it?"

"No, it's all wrong," says Nora. "If people know they can get a divorce, they won't bother to try to make a success of their marriage. Every disagreement that crops up they'll start talking about going off."

"Oh, well," says Doris, "I know your Church is against divorce, that's why you say it's wrong."

"No, it's the other way about," says Nora. "Divorce is all wrong, and that's why the Church is against it."

The conversation continues, with Nora speaking out of a persistent realism. We hear in our time that "love"—by which is meant powerful affection salted with sexual desire—sugars a multitude of sin. This is antisocial. Says Nora: "Love is no reason for people breaking their solemn promises."

Only a few of the book's two hundred pages relate to sex. This was before the hurricane hit. The sexual had not yet destroyed the social. To boys, Father Drinkwater says, "Get a right attitude towards girls. Respect, companionship. They are not 'dolls' or 'judys' but human persons as much as you." Also: "Recognize the difference between lust and love; quite simple really, in one the main thing is greed and self-seeking, in the other the main object is the happiness of the one loved."

To girls: "All girls are interested in weddings, and in their own some day. But the main point is, no hurry. No hurry at *all*. Meanwhile you will be naturally interested in boys, all the more if you have no brothers. Get to know plenty, but there is never any need to make yourself cheap." By that, he does not imply fornication; it is not in the picture. The dangers to watch out for are: vanity, luxury, and having "a full-time boy-friend too early." How is one to tell the good from the bad? "Watch how he treats his mother and sisters."

My God, my God, why have we forsaken common sense and com-

mon decency? We have gained nothing but loneliness and antisocial pathologies that Father Drinkwater could not have imagined. It is no longer linoleum and plywood. It is poison, darkness of mind and perversity of will, solitariness without solitude, and rancor and recrimination between the sexes. Fill a church? We do not fill bowling alleys or dance halls.

Repent, turn back, go home, and be human again.⁵

What is remarkable, though remarkably terrifying, is how primitive we have become. Lost among all the technological marvels and modern conveniences is our humanity with all its faults and failures, its greatness and sublime achievements. We have become satisfied with the *status quo*, no longer do we search for meaning, for love, for God. We want without effort, we demand without reason, we love what we possess and hate what we do not. We believe what we hear without question or thought; the pied piper leads and we blindly follow his song.

Our discourse, whether private or public, religious or secular, has become delinquent and puerile. It takes no genius to notice the disintegration of civility and absence of reason that now permeates our lives. Freedom and liberty, patriotism and national pride are become unfashionable, synonymous with bigotry and hate. Disagreement is disallowed; *E pluribus Unum*, (Out of many, One,) fails to recognize diversity and is therefore "Hate" speech. "*In God we Trust*" is hurtful to those who do not believe in God. The will of the offended outweighs the will of the many. The past is unimportant

until it is important to one's own purposes.

Do you see the pattern? The rhetoric of "liberty" and "choice" is deployed to advance progressive ideology until the old morality and its premises are dislodged and progressives gain control of the levers of cultural, political, and legal power. At that point, authority imposes progressivism's own substantive conception of morality and the good (its "comprehensive view"). Whether or not those pushing what used to be called "liberalism" (or "political liberalism") were insincere from the start, it should not have been difficult to see where their allegedly "morally neutral" or "anti-perfectionist" liberalism would take us. It should have been clear—to some of us it *was* clear, and we said so in our writings—that "liberals" (such as the great Harvard philosopher John Rawls and my own teacher, Ronald Dworkin) were smuggling into their theories of political morality decidedly non-neutral conceptions of what is good and bad, right and wrong. Neutrality was an illusion. The liberal conception of "freedom" would end up justifying forms of coercion that the old liberals swore to us they had no intention of justifying. I did not expect to see judicially mandated abortions quite this soon, but I knew that the coercive power of the state would quickly be used against cake bakers and florists, as well as against Catholic and other religious hospitals and foster care and adoption agencies and religious schools of many different faiths. It was "in the cards."

It gives me exactly zero pleasure to say: I told you so.

The plutocrats circle the wagons around feticide. Is there anything quite as ugly as the rich and powerful marshaling their wealth and influence in the cause of slaying the

innocent and vulnerable? May God protect those whom they would expose to the abortionist's knife and turn the hearts of these modern-day King Herods.

The economic and cultural power of contemporary social liberalism is extraordinary. The abortion and sex lib movements, for example, can virtually command the entertainment and news media, big business, the Chamber of Commerce, educational institutions at every level, the nation's largest and most important philanthropic institutions, the major professional associations, the mainline churches, national civic associations like the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and on and on. If the movement says, "refer to same-sex marriage as 'marriage equality,'" these institutions immediately comply. If the movement says "refer to abortion as 'abortion care' or 'reproductive health' and sign on to the rhetoric of abortion as 'equality,'" they do just that. If the movement says "fly the rainbow flag," they compliantly hoist the flag. If we add that the fact that the movement can take, and has taken, the scalps of people like Brendan Eich and displayed them *pour encourager les autres*, it's easy to understand why people—even those who personally dissent from socially liberal orthodoxy—are intimidated.

Some people, fearing adverse professional or personal consequences for expressing disagreement, outwardly manifest support for abortion and sexual liberationist ideology. Many others simply go silent. Even people with the ultimate job security—tenure—keep their mouths shut, and I understand why. The movement can make a socially or morally conservative professor's life a nightmare on a college campus, tenure or no tenure. It takes genuine courage to openly deny—or even seriously question—socially liberal dogmas, and genuine courage is very rarely

in ample supply in this vale of tears. The supply goes up, though, if we encourage (that is, put courage in) each other. It goes up if we model courage for each other, especially in the face of the bullying. It goes up still further if we stand together in bold dissent, giving public witness to our belief in the sanctity of human life and in conjugal marriage and morally upright sexual conduct.

Of course, courage, by definition, involves risk and a willingness to sacrifice. Among those who boldly speak out against the sacred beliefs of a faith as economically and culturally powerful as social liberalism has in our time become there will be victims. I will not pretend otherwise. And anyone who does speak out is potentially one of the victims—no one has a guarantee of immunity. But if those of us in dissent are right, there is an enormous amount at stake—the lives of unborn babies; the future of the family and of everything in society that depends on the vitality and flourishing of the marriage-based family; religious liberty and the rights of conscience. These are causes bigger than ourselves. They are causes worthy of our taking risks and making

A central goal of the tyrant is to be able to bully or shame people into saying things they know or believe not to be true. When a tyrant achieves that kind of power over people, the rest is a mere mopping up operation. Keep that in mind when someone tries to compel you to say things like "some men give birth to babies" or "some women have prostate cancer" or "that man used to be a woman" or "that woman was 'assigned' a male sex at birth." If anyone wonders why Professor Jordan Peterson is refusing to conform his use of language to the dictates of "transgender" activists, it is because he understands how.

tyranny works. He knows that free people do not permit themselves to be bullied into saying things they believe to be false.⁶

How often do we hear words that have lost their meaning? How much of what we hear is delivered through euphemisms, mild indirections or expressions substituted for what may be considered too harsh, too unpleasant or embarrassing? How often do haters claim hatred belongs to those who do not hate? How often do those who deny the existence of God object to those who do? When did a lie become truth and truth a lie?

Actor Kevin Sorbo has frequently excoriated those who support abortion over life, illegal aliens over citizens, and refugees over veterans on Twitter. In 2018, as he has done many times, he and his wife denounced abortion as “evil.”

Secular humanists have made the word *abortion* sound like a woman’s right, synonymous with health care, female empowerment, standing for women’s issues, a choice, a solution; anything but the truth,” the couple wrote in a op-ed for CNS News. “The truth is, however, *abortion* is the termination of life. It is just a euphemism for murder because the only reason to get an abortion is to avoid the potential of birth—a human birth.

We dress it up with “my body, my choice,” but it is still a life inside of a woman’s womb, and that life is still extinguished by the brutal procedure of abortion.

What is seriously wrong is our complacency, our unwillingness to refuse to speak other than on their

terms. When we accept and use euphemistic language, we grant that language power and legitimacy. Which word carries more power: abortion or infanticide, termination or murder? Which words are positive, which are negative: healthcare or abortion, right or wrong, good or evil?

In front of me now is a cartoon *Non Sequitur* by Wiley. Superimposed over a scene from a state fair is the caption: The Willful Ignorance State Fair. Various booths and directional signs include: Fried Health Food, Fat is Good 4 U, Chocolate Weight Loss Booth, Flat Earth Science Pavilion, Healthy Donuts, and Trickle Down Wealth Ride-Perfectly safe!

Wisdom is not free, neither is liberty. Wisdom comes to those willing to make the effort to learn, the determination to grow in knowledge and understanding, and the humility to accept counsel from the wisest of those who have come before. Only the fool welcomes the mosquito to the feast. Only the fool enjoys the plague left behind.

1. John Lukacs, *The Reality of Written Words*, *Chronicles*, December 1, 1998..
2. Scott P. Richert, *The Word Remains*, *Chronicles*, July 2019.
3. Plato, *The Republic*.
4. Father Joseph Fessio, S.J., founder and editor of Ignatius Press, from the FORMED Book Club discussion of *Salvation: What Every Catholic Should Know* by Michael Barber, *The Catholic World Report*, *Heaven, Hell, C.S. Lewis, and Hans Urs von Balthasar*, July 11, 2019.
5. Anthony Esolen, “Reclaiming the Forgotten Wisdom of a Bygone Era,” *Crisis Magazine*, July 8, 2019.
6. Robert P. George, McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and Director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University, various quotes taken from Professor George’s Facebook page.

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

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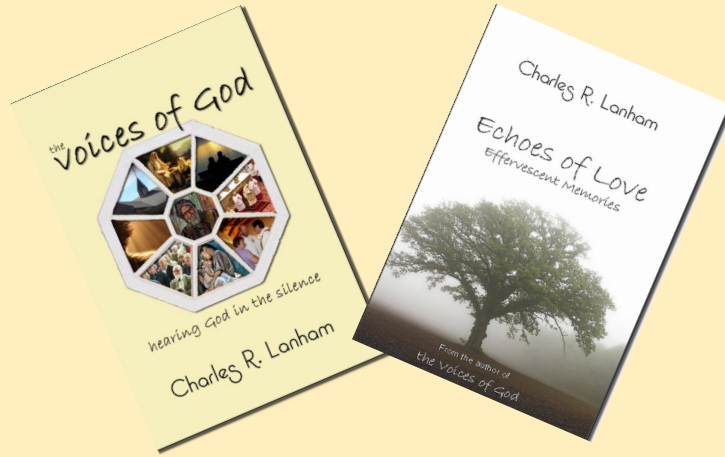
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Deacon Chuck Lanham is an author, columnist, speaker, and a servant of God.

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