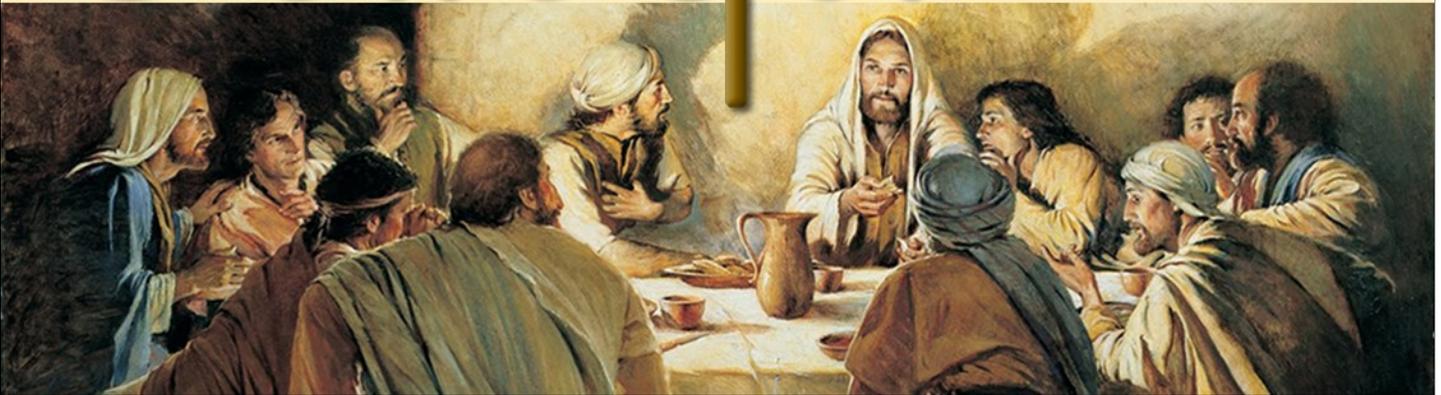


Colloquī

December 20, 2019
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A journal for restless minds

Two Come Eleven

What are the odds?

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.

Two Come Eleven

What are the odds?

Recently, a friend noted that I quoted Chesterton not at all infrequently to which I must in perfect honesty enter a plea of *nolo contendere*. I freely admit to the dishonest pleasure of pilfering a phrase or paragraph, on occasion two or more; a rather useful habit I have acquired by diligently adhering to Sutton's Law. When asked why he robbed banks, Willie Sutton supposedly replied, "Because that's where the money is." Unlike Willie, however, I am an honest thief, admitting to my brazen pilfering of what is clearly not mine while giving Mr. Chesterton full faith and credit; admittedly, I borrow what was written because I could not write it better. Another friend, upon the mention of G. K. Chesterton, querulously quizzed, "Who?" which I suppose

should be expected given few these days bother to read anything written beyond a quarter their age, if they are of a mind to read anything at all.

For those who have not had the singular honor of his acquaintance, please allow me to introduce Mr. Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936.) He has often

been referred to as the "prince of paradox" which those who have read even a smidgeon of his prodigious work will readily understand. Time magazine said of his style: "Whenever possible Chesterton made his points with popular sayings, prov-

erbs, allegories—first carefully turning them inside out"

A man of many talents—specially with the English language—Chesterton was an English (British) journalist, novelist, essayist, poet, artist, philosopher, lay



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theologian, literary and art critic, and most notably, an "orthodox" Christian who eventually converted to Roman Catholicism from High Church Anglicanism.

Near the end of Chesterton's life, Pope Pius XI invested him as Knight Commander with Star of the Papal Order of St. Gregory the Great (KC*SG). The Chesterton Society has proposed a cause for beatification, the first step towards canonization. He is remembered liturgically on June 13 by the Episcopal Church, with a provisional feast day as adopted at the 2009 General Convention.

Of Chesterton, his "friendly enemy" George Bernard Shaw said, "He was a man of colossal genius." He was *both* a "colossus"—standing 6 feet 4 inches, weighing in at 286 pounds—and a "genius". When asked during the First World War why he was not "out at the Front", he replied, "If you go round to the side, you will see that I am." On another occasion he remarked to his friend George Bernard Shaw, "To look at you, anyone would think a famine had struck England." Shaw retorted, "To look at you, anyone would think you had caused it."

Chesterton usually wore a cape and a crumpled hat, with a swordstick in hand, and a cigar hanging out of his mouth. He had a tendency to forget where he was supposed to be going and miss the train that was supposed to take him there. It is reported that on several occasions he sent a telegram to his wife Frances from an incorrect location, writing such things as "Am in

Market Harborough. Where ought I to be?" to which she would reply, "Home".

He was a prodigious writer, the author of 80 books, several hundred poems, 200 short stories, 4000 essays, and several plays. From 1932 until his death, Chesterton delivered over 40 radio talks per year for the BBC. A 38-volume collection under the common title "G.K. Chesterton Collected Works" published by Ignatius Press contains many if not most of his fiction and non-fiction books, poems, plays, and 11 volumes containing nearly 1200 weekly essays written for the *Illustrated London News* over a span of 30-plus years from 1905 thru 1936.

Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw were famous friends and each thoroughly enjoyed their frequent arguments and discussions. Rarely in agreement, they genuinely liked and respected each other—certainly a rarity these days where the slightest gesture or word, the smallest infraction or even an unspoken thought is of certain to offend. Chesterton, however, despite his friendship, never hesitated to express on where they differed and why. In *Heretics* he wrote of Shaw:

After belabouring a great many people for a great many years for being unprogressive, Mr. Shaw has discovered, with characteristic sense, that it is very doubtful whether any existing human being with two legs can be progressive at all. Having come to doubt whether humanity can be combined with progress, most people, easily pleased, would have elected to abandon progress and remain with humanity. Mr. Shaw, not being easily pleased, decides to throw over

humanity with all its limitations and go in for progress for its own sake. If man, as we know him, is incapable of the philosophy of progress, Mr. Shaw asks, not for a new kind of philosophy, but for a new kind of man. It is rather as if a nurse had tried a rather bitter food for some years on a baby, and on discovering that it was not suitable, should not throw away the food and ask for a new food, but throw the baby out of window, and ask for a new baby.

There is an ineffable fondness and begrudging appreciation to admit how much I find Chesterton the bane of my poor inconsequence. Born of kindred mind and spirit, somewhen, neither then nor now, yet belonging somewhere somehow across both time and place. I read his words and they are mine though not in the least my own.

There is an all too patent familiarity with the politics, economics, ethics, and religion of the century now passed from the present one. It is as if time has stood encased in concrete with no particular when to go. Too much of Shaw, nary a word of Chesterton; humanity thrown out of window for the sake of a new baby called progress. It takes no genius to know genius when it knocks you upside-down but first you must welcome it with an open mind, not slam the door in its face.

In an essay for the *Illustrated London News* of March 3, 1932, *Taking Care of the Child*, Chesterton, in his inimical style, wrote of a "meeting of certain eminent ladies, of a political and philanthropic sort, who discussed the great modern problem of what is to be done with The Child" of which

the ladies were not speaking of any child belonging to them or any of their acquaintance and social class. No, as Chesterton noted, "He is a creature entirely solitary and *sui generis*; and he lives in the slums."

By-the-by, he came upon a remark made by a "very famous political lady, who certainly believes that what she says represents the most lofty luminous idealism" who "uttered on this occasion the following words: 'We must care for other people's children as if they were our own.'"

And when I read those words, I smote the table with my hand, like one who has suddenly located and smashed a wasp. I said to myself: "That's it! She's got it! She's got the exactly correct formula for the worst and most poisonous of all the political wrongs that rot out the entrails of the world. That is what has wrecked democracy; wrecked domesticity through the breadth and depth of democracy; wrecked dignity as the only prop and pillar of domesticity and democracy. That is what has taken away from the poor man the pride and honour of the father of a household, so that he can no longer really feel any pride or honour in being a citizen; still less in being merely a voter. The Englishman's house is no longer his castle, nor is he king of the castle; the *charbonnier* is no longer *maître chez lui*; his hut is not his hut; his children are not his children; and democracy is dead. She means no harm. She knows not what she does. She does not even understand what she says. She does not comprehend a word of the terrible sentence that she has spoken. But it is spoken. And the sentence that is spoken is this: "We the rich, can take care of poor people's children

as if they were our own. As we have abolished their parents, they are all orphans."

The ideal is sufficiently familiar in fact, of course; and there is nothing very much against it, except that it is utterly and grossly immoral. ... The question is whether any human rights whatever remain to the ... man, who is made legally responsible for his children and his wife. If he ill-treats them, it is perfectly right to put the exceptional legal machinery, which exists for such exceptional evils, in motion against him. But it is not right, by any code of common morals yet recognized among men, to start from the very first with the assumption that his children belong to you as much as they belong to him. ... We are dealing with a profound plutocratic assumption, accidentally revealed by a chance phrase. The poor children are born under the power and protection of a governing class, as wards in Chancery are born under the power and protection of the Lord Chancellor; they inherit that status, whether our own conscience inclines us to call it a status of slavery or of safety. Note that the lady does not say—though she doubtless would say—"When I hear of a child being beaten with a red-hot poker, the common human bond makes me feel as angry as if it were my own child." She does not deal with hard cases, or even individual cases; she generalizes from the start. She assumes that she will, in fact, manage, she assumes that she will be allowed to manage, any other children as if they were her own. And in practice she is probably right; it is the supreme and final proof that in theory she is entirely wrong. Our society has unconsciously and unresistingly admitted this great heresy against humanity. The notion of making the head of a humble family really independent and responsible, like a citizen, has really vanished from the mind of most of the realists of our real

world. It is the less wonder that it has never even entered the head of an idealist.

The trouble is that in our society the ideal is more wrong than the real. Old Tories used to insist on teaching to the poor the principles of respect for private property, lest they should revolt and despoil the rich. As a fact, it is the rich who have to be taught about the existence of private property, and especially about the existence of private life.

How utterly demoralizing it is that so little has changed. So much of the current political debate evidences the intransigence of the progressive mind. Children are but potential tools to be pressed and molded into mindless drones for the benefit of the power class. "It takes a village" rather than a family for the family cannot be controlled; parents must not be allowed to rear their progeny as they see fit—when and how must be determined by society. It is for society to dictate what children will be taught, what they will be fed, what careers they will pursue, what god(s) they will worship.

Of course, that is not what is preached, but it is the goal, the aim, the ultimate objective. Behind and beneath the rhetoric promising free stuff by making the rich—note the generous generality—pay their fair share—again, generous generality—there is the altruistic denial of the truism "you get what you pay for." And of course, unmentioned, is mention of God. Father knows best, father loves you, father will take care of you, but father is the father of lies not the Father of Truth; evil will destroy you, evil will

send you straight to the everlasting fires of hell.

Nearly two-and-a-half years ago, I wrote of the ineffable value of human life and the sanctity of the family.¹ Though I never used those words—it was a reflection of a conversation between my mother and Andy Rooney—the intended message should have been rather obvious. While it is neither Shakespeare nor Chesterton, it is, in my humble imagination, worth repeating as we quickly come to Christmas and the birth of the Christ child. Every child, born and unborn is loved by God as if born of the Virgin to become man.

Family Matters

Altering the rhythm of life

Earlier this past week, a cousin of mine posted on Facebook a photograph she had uncovered while rummaging through her mother's attic. In it were eight women with thirteen preschool children, four small enough to be held in their mother's arms.

After some discussion and a bit of deduction, we concluded it most likely was taken in the summer of 1963. The eight women were all relatively the same age, give or take a year or two, all in their mid- to late-thirties. Assuming that 1963 was indeed the year it was taken, my mother would have celebrated her 37th birthday that July.

My mother stood at one end of the group of mothers holding her eighth child, and standing in front of her

were numbers five, six, and seven. Further down the line, mother number six in the picture was my aunt, with one of hers in her arms and another standing in front of her.

A bit more deductive work determined that God would ultimately bless these eight wonderful women with sixty-five children; my mother and her sister accounting for nearly one-third with twenty-one of them.

As I was reflecting on this photograph and this week's readings, I remembered a treasured letter written by my mother, some twenty-one years later, in May 1984. It was addressed to Andy Rooney, the curmudgeon of *Sixty-Minutes* fame, and was in response to a column of his concerning the death of David Kennedy, the fourth child of eleven children of Robert and Ethel Kennedy, who died April 25th, 1984 of a drug overdose.



In his column, Rooney concluded by simple assumptive logic that the cause of David Kennedy's long-standing drug abuse problems and ultimately his untimely and tragic death was not a result of watching (as a 12-year-old boy) his father's assassination on television; no, Rooney concluded that the cause of Kennedy's

problems was due to him being one in a family of too many children.

A brief aside: the IBM PC was first introduced in August, 1981 and the Apple Macintosh in January, 1984. My mother used a manual typewriter and carbon-paper sandwiched between often used-one-side paper for copies. For instance, the backs of the two-page copy which I now cherish, are from a workbook with the title: METRIC/U.S. CUSTOMARY UNIT EQUIVALENTS followed by various formulas for calculating metric units into U.S. units of measure. The Great Depression taught her never to waste anything.

As we older ones moved away, the number of copies increased. With well-worn carbon-paper and 3-4 copies the one who received the last copy often had a difficult time deciphering what she had written. On occasion, she would slip the carbon-paper in backwards, which added to the difficulty in reading her letters.

What follows is the letter she wrote to Mr. Rooney, followed by his eventual response.

May 14, 1984

Dear Andy Rooney:

I enclose a column I wrote a few weeks ago, just to show you that I enjoy and often quote from your column.

But like so many of my own critics, I did not write until I had a complaint. Alas, I find that my idol has feet of clay.

I refer to the column which you wrote about

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young David Kennedy's death. It was done in your usual magnificent style, until you reached the conclusion that the cause of his problems was being one of too many children.

You have a right to your opinion about the propriety or downright error of having 11 children. But when you make the simplistic assumption that David's problems were the result of being one of 11, I have to take you to task.

You might just as well say, "I have a rose. This rose is red. Therefore all roses are red."

Would it not be just as logical to say, "His parents were too involved in the world of politics and power—therefore he had problems," or "They had too much money—his upbringing was not normal," or "There was too much attention paid to his famous family and he could not stand the pressure"?

Or is it just possible that all of these facts, plus the terrifying experience he had watching his father die, plus whatever was his own personal make-up, combined to produce such tragic results?

I find it frightening and sad that you would blame this sad case on the size of the young man's family. I have known people who had no siblings who turned to drugs, crime and/or suicide. I have known some from families of two or three who did not turn out so well. But I have never heard anyone say, "If they had just had more children, this would not have happened.

I, too, am a mother of 11. We do not have wealth or fame. It has been a struggle to train them, feed and cloth them and educate

them. They all learned to work, they helped take care of each other, and my husband and I were always here when they needed us.

Twice within recent weeks, we have been told, "Mom and Dad, I am so happy that you made us carry papers and have other jobs and save our money. It is amazing the young people who have no idea what the real world is all about."

We have four college graduates, whom we helped a little. Beyond that, they have worked to pay for their education. Two more are in college, two daughters have helped put their husbands through college with their own good jobs.

When my husband came home from school, I was not off playing bridge, at a cocktail party, or off to Europe. Although I wrote for several newspapers, I made arrangements to do so at home, and many a column was written with one baby on my lap and others at my side. I could so easily say it was not the size of the Kennedy family, but their preoccupation with politics and the good life that caused young David's problems.

But that would be just as wrong as your assumption. Each of us has to do what we have to do, at the time and place and with the circumstances that are at our disposal. I was able to stay at home and work; many mothers can't. Our children had jobs; some are not so fortunate.

If mistakes are made, let's not blame them on one isolated fact. If David's problems were caused by the size of his family, how do you account for large families who are spared such grief?

I make no apologies for the size of our family. They are good young people, not perfect, certain-

ly, but no worse than many from smaller families. Each one has much to give to society. I wonder which I should not have had. The one who, at age nine, was carrying 90 papers each day, and who at 27 became vice-president of his company? Or another, now working on his master's degree in agronomy, doing research on natural ways to get rid of insects and weed pests? Or any of the rest, all productive members of society, good mothers and fathers, bright students, loving sons and daughters?

We could yet have tragedy in our lives. We are not immune, and I repeat that none of these 11 are saints or even heroes. But when you find me a child from a small family that is either, would you please let me know?

Sincerely yours,

Nellie Ann Lanham

Andy Rooney replied with a typewritten letter on October 12, 1984, three short months before my parents were killed in an automobile accident on January 16, 1985. Little did she know nor could have anticipated that tragedy would so soon come calling with hers and Dad's untimely passing.

12 Oct 1984

Dear Nellie Ann,

I didn't answer your letter but it was too good to throw away.

It seems likely I was too strong in that column but I can't get away from thinking that anyone who has 11 children must have a very high opinion of the value of his and her progeny to the world. If all couples, married and unmarried, had 11 children,

the earth would soon be uninhabitable.

It may be possible for parents who devote full time to their children to rear a large family successfully but the Kennedy's had too much else on their minds to do the job properly.

But, as you say, it's just my opinion.

Thanks for writing. I've been asked to come to some Mark Twain festival in Hannibal next summer but doubt if I can make it.

Sincerely,

Andrew A. Rooney

These two letters between two people with dissimilar points of view stand in stark contrast to what currently serves as discourse (seldom is it *civil*) and should serve to remind us of how steep and precipitous the decline in *civil* discourse has been over the intervening thirty-three years. Neither found it necessary to lash out with vitriolic and vicious name-calling; each stated their "opinion" without resorting to unsubstantiated fake facts and hyperbolic generalities to "prove" the other to be misguided, uninformed, xenophobic, racist, sexist, bigoted, deplorable, cruel, uncaring, greedy, etc., etc., etc. Each genuinely recognized the other with respect, sincerity and graciousness. What a difference three decades make!

Here I must concede: I am unabashedly biased. As her firstborn, I agree with my mother substantially more than Mr. Rooney. One brief but inconsequential observation to illustrate: like my mother, I generally enjoyed Andy Rooney's commentary

while never elevating him to the level of an idol.

There are a few additional points which these letters suggest further discussion; points that I will attempt—hopefully, with as much reason and civility as was displayed by my mother and Mr. Rooney—to add to their conversation. In the process, I will at some point return to the photograph with which I began this essay.

I shall begin here with a few thoughts on one specific statement made by Mr. Rooney in his response: "I can't get away from thinking that anyone who has 11 children must have a very high opinion of the value of his and her progeny to the world." Had my mother responded I am absolutely certain she would have been in complete agreement, even though I am equally certain Mr. Rooney's intentions were not meant to be complimentary.

Mr. Rooney clearly articulates the unwarranted and near-universally accepted argument that the value of the human person is determined by those who live in the world.

The Declaration of Independence claims equality for all ("We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, ..."), a claim verifiably false in its most common interpretation, for each of us is a unique creation of God, with different abilities, talents, levels of intelligence, desires, and inclinations. Every human being who has ever walked this earth and for those yet to come, not one is the same in physical stature, mental ability, or spiritual sanctity.

These are unique attributes granted to us by our Creator God. Man has neither the authority nor the power to arrogate such to man. What man has not the power to grant, man has not the power to devalue.

My parents were parentally proud of the eleven "progeny" with which God had blessed them and they had high hopes for what each might one day accomplish. But they knew from where the value of each was determined and they dared not offer such "very high opinion," for they knew the value of each was for God alone to determine.

Whenever such power is assumed by man, inevitably, false criterion are manifested. The most obvious and horrendous example of such is the complete and devastating devaluation of the unborn child, deemed of no discernable, even negative, value for no other reason than its inconvenient existence.

Mr. Rooney continues, albeit with a bit of hyperbole, that "If all couples, married and unmarried, had 11 children, the earth would soon be uninhabitable." To such a statement, no one, including my mother, would argue the raw, unvarnished truth to such a bald statement. However, such a statement belies the truth that at no time in human history has such an event occurred, nor is it at all probable.

Like the lady mentioned by Chesterton, Rooney does not deal with hard cases, he generalizes from the start; he would play God with loaded dice.

Returning to the photograph of the eight women pictured, their children numbered (not in order of appearance): 13, 11, 10, 8, 7, 6, 5, and 5. Obviously, the number of children differed between these women. God gave each according to his plan. No more, no less.

What is perhaps the most telling statement in Mr. Rooney's response follows, "It may be possible for parents who devote full time to their children to rear a large family successfully but the Kennedy's had too much else on their minds to do this job properly." Again, superficially, what Rooney writes is true, superficially. Yet, to borrow from his own words, "I can't get away from thinking" there is much left unstated and a good bit of assumption in what he writes; so much it begs further parsing.

Modern parents have come to believe that parenting is somehow a part-time avocation. Mr. Rooney falls prey to this belief, accepting implicitly the notion that child-rearing does not necessitate full devotion to the cause of raising children.

As my mother admitted "many a column was written with one baby on my lap and others at my side." She also wrote of the difficulties which parents of any size, including large ones, must face, "It has been a struggle to train them, feed and cloth them and educate them." What she failed to mention were the sacrifices they made to insure that each of us received a private Catholic education. They were married for eighteen years before they took their first vacation, with or in this case on their own.

My parents and the parents of their generation, for the most part, believed in the providence of Almighty God and given one, two, or eleven children to raise, took their vows and their familial responsibilities with the gravity they demanded.

As for Mr. Rooney's rather simplistic assumption that "the Kennedy's had too much else on their minds to do the job properly" it is as he rightly admitted, just his opinion. Whether his claim bears any truth is but conjecture on his part, and who is he to throw the first stone, to cast judgment on the propriety of their childrearing.

We have become stone throwers. Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). Unlike the Pharisees, who "went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest," we deny our sinfulness, gleefully throwing all the stones we can heft.

We no longer let our conscience guide us; we have forgotten or ignore who and what we are; in our arrogance, we have elevated the creature to the divine, making of ourselves more than we are of a right to be. In so doing we have come to alter the rhythm of life. We know longer see what God has so wonderfully made. Children, once a precious gift from God, are but burdensome crosses. Children are options, no longer gifts; a burden lifted, a cross discarded. My mother said it all when she asked: "I wonder which I should not have had?" Thanks be, they let God roll the dice.

1. Colloqui, *Family Matters: Altering the rhythm of life*, June 23, 2017, Volume 02, Number 05.

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.

The Day Is Now Far Spent

Robert Cardinal Sarah

Ignatius Press
2019, 350 pages.

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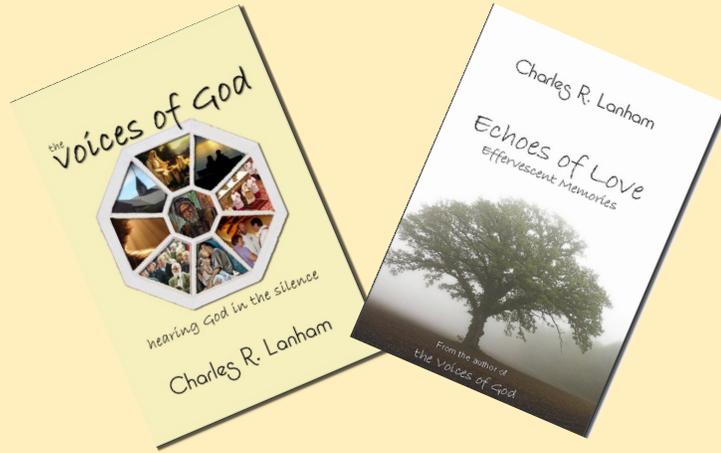
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Deacon Chuck Lanham is an author, columnist, speaker, and a servant of God.

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Each issue of **Colloquī** can be viewed or downloaded from <http://deaconscorner.org>.

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~ G. K. CHESTERTON

"When men stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing; they believe in anything."

"There are two ways to get enough: One is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less."

G.K. Chesterton