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A journal for restless minds

Colloquī *: to discuss*

Surrection of a Profane Church

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Deacon's Diner

Food for a restless mind

Surrection of a Profane Church

On the subordination of the Divine to the mundane

To ask one born blind to describe a rainbow is perceptibly obscene, though, I suppose, no more so than to dare an atheist show proof for the existence of God. Such profane requests serve no truer purpose than disrespect for the mundane and pyrite to the alchemist. Such is that vagrant stale air what then fills the soul, a caustic smog that blows nowhere, everywhere, anywhere, somewhere, and then unbidden, chokes the spirit and buries the light beneath the crypted stone.

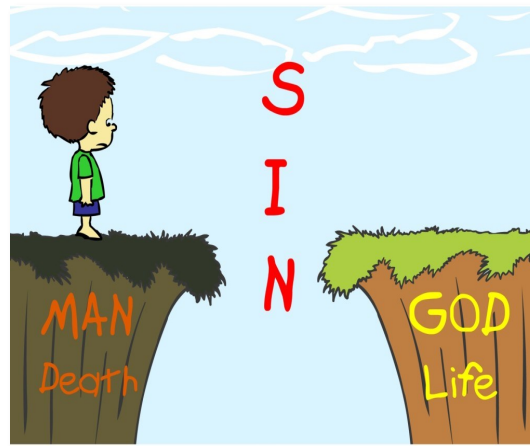
God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?

"Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: 'I seek God! I seek God!' — As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated? — Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him* -- you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not be-

come colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."¹

In truth, of course, God is not dead, though he has been profanely trivialized, too often absent from the hearts and minds of those who believe in nothing or themselves. For far too many, God has become irrelevant, merely a too infrequent, inconvenient thought. "Rather than conforming ourselves to him, we have made ourselves into our own gods around whom God must adjust."



In order to disobey God, we must first diminish him. We will not adore a being who is our subordinate. We don't stand in awe of what is beneath us. Once diminished, devotion to him becomes not only unnecessary but unreasonable. This is why for so many today, the Christian faith seems to be a sign of weakness, or even stupidity.

In ensuring God revolves around us, we conceive of him as being what he is not, and in that void, we make gods of ourselves. This is at the heart of the will's triumph over reason, over nature, and over God. What we desire becomes right by the sheer fact of our desiring it. It is now we, not he, who know all, love all, are all-powerful. If we keep God around at all, it is for the sake of sentimentalism or custom. Either way, it will not last.²

Make no mistake, we find ourselves—however reluctant, for there can be no conscientious objectors—combatants in the eternal war between heaven and hell and casualties are unimaginably high. It is an unconventional war in so far as it "is a war of words against the Word."

It is a revolution which elevates will over reason, the group over the person, and human power over higher authority. What is rejected—reason, the person, and authority—are the three characteristics of the Logos himself. The Logos is the *mind* of God, communicated in the *person* of Jesus Christ, who is the author of all and *authority* over all. Whether explicitly or not, he is the

ultimate target of the woke revolt.

It is a revolt that manifests itself in various ways in every age, and one which St. John knew in his day. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (Jn 1:1-3). "And the word became flesh." God, the logos, the word, is being itself. He is "Who am." Where the very nature of God is ordered, unitive, and generative, the spirit of this counter movement is at its core the very nature of the devil: chaotic, divisive, sterile.³

The initial battles were waged solely between angelic forces, but now all of humankind has been conscripted, forced out of necessity into battles as profane yet no less deadly. Some, but not all, have become as Lucifer, son of the morning star, who, in their vanity and conceit, declare, "I will make myself like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:14). Those who so succumb so soon forget or choose to disremember the grievous loss, the fall from heaven's grace.

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. Rejoice then, O heaven and you that dwell therein! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short (Revelation 12:7-9, 12).

Machiavelli advised his earthly prince "that one ought never allow a disorder to take place in order to avoid war, for war is not thereby avoided, but only deferred to your disadvantage,"⁴ words that echo the words of Jesus, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters (Matthew 12:30). Those who would avoid war when war is pressed close around them would be well advised: there are no non-combatants, no conscientious objectors, no collateral damage. All must choose between good and evil; no one can choose to sit on the sidelines and root for the favored. Those who countenance evil and align themselves with the serpent ought to recall the words of the Lord: "From the least to the greatest of them, every one is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, every one deals falsely. They have

healed the wound of my people lightly, saying 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown" (Jeremiah 6:13-15).

Falling down the rabbit hole

The further society has distanced itself from God, from his "spiritual imperative," the greater the clamor for a temporal home, to be subjugated and lorded over by newly anointed profane gods. Augustine wrote, "we have learned that there is a city of God, and its Founder has inspired us with a love which makes us covet its citizenship. To this Founder of the holy city the citizens of the earthly city prefer their own gods, not knowing that He is the God of gods, not of false, *i.e.* of impious and proud gods, who, being deprived of His unchangeable and freely communicated light, and so reduced to a kind of poverty stricken power, eagerly grasp at their own private privileges and seek divine honors from their deluded subjects."⁵

Thomas Sowell attributes much to divers of visions that vary "from person to person, from society to society, and from one era to another. ... The rise of the mass media, mass politics, and massive government means that the beliefs which drive a relatively small group of articulate people," have increasingly provided the few with "great leverage in determining the course taken by a whole society."

Dangers to a society may be mortal without being immediate. One such danger is the prevailing social vision of our time—and the dogmatism with which the ideas, assumptions, and attitudes behind that vision are held.

It is not that these views are especially evil or especially erroneous. Human beings have been making mistakes and committing sins as long as there have been human beings. The great catastrophes of history have usually involved much more than that. Typically, there has been an additional and crucial ingredient—some method by which feedback from reality has been prevented, so that a dangerous course of action could be blindly continued to a fatal conclusion. ... Today, despite free speech and the mass media, the prevailing social vision is dangerously close to sealing itself off from any discordant feedback from reality.⁶

Paul Kingsnorth, writing for *First Things*, adds a divine dimension to the inexorable shift from reality. “Out in the world, the rebellion against God has become a rebellion against everything: roots, culture, community, families, biology itself.”

Machine progress—the triumph of the Nietzschean will—dissolves the glue that once held us. Fires are set around the supporting pillars of the culture by those charged with guarding it, urged on by an ascendant faction determined to erase the past, abuse their ancestors, and dynamite their cultural inheritance, the better to build their earthly paradise on *terra nullius*. Massing against them are the new Defenders of the West, some calling for a return to the atomized liberalism that got us here in the first place, others defending a remnant Christendom that seems to have precious little to do with Christ and forgets Christopher Lasch’s warning that “God, not culture, is the only appropriate object of unconditional reverence and wonder.” Two profane visions going head-to-head, when what we are surely crying out for is the only thing that can heal us: a return to the sacred center around which any real culture is built.⁷

The fault of our agnostic visions is laid bare: we are become blind; hypocrites refusing to take the logs from our eyes insisting the corruption belongs to others. We no longer seek perfection in the Perfect so we mindlessly embrace the imperfect—we follow the rabbit hole down in search of a phantasmagoric vision, of a wonderland without limits, an irrational Eden where evil becomes good and good becomes evil, where we can ordain to be as gods—small, insignificant gods to be sure.

“Every living culture in history, from the smallest tribe to the largest civilization, has been built around a spiritual core: a central claim about the relationship between human culture, non-human nature, and divinity.” Kingsnorth further notes, correctly I must add, “Every culture that lasts understands that living within limits—limits set by natural law, by cultural tradition, by ecological boundaries—is a cultural necessity and a spiritual imperative. There seems to be only one culture in history that has held none of this to be true, and it happens to be the one we’re living in.”

It is increasingly apparent that our postmodern society has gone completely off the rails, foregoing truth, rea-

son, rationality, religion, and objectivity for the politically correct narrative (propaganda), not a new phenomenon to be sure but pervasive—so pervasive it is today virtually impossible to discover the truth on any given topic. “We now find ourselves in a culture that had jettisoned truth for narrative, relativism for reality. We live in a world that is following a toxic new religion based on postmodern neo-Marxism.”

For millennia, Christianity was the dominant religion in the West. As such, it provided the moral and metaphysical framework within which people understood reality, identity, and purpose. But as the West has continued to secularize, a new generation has emerged into an unsustainable religious vacuum. It’s unsustainable because people need meaning no less than they need food and water. Secularism has failed to provide any meaning beyond a hopeless hedonism. “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow, we die” (1 Corinthians 15:32).

To be human is to long for meaning in life—a purpose big enough to live for and even to die for. With Christianity no longer a viable option for many, what will fill this hole in the soul? ... [Many have] embraced a belief system that has been incubating in Western universities since the 1950s, alternatively known as critical theory or ideological social justice. This is more than just an academic philosophy; it is nothing less than a fully formed religious belief system rooted in postmodern and neo-Marxist assumptions.

Ideas have consequences. The core beliefs of the Biblical worldview helped shape the West into a relatively free, prosperous civilization. The core beliefs of this toxic new religion are giving rise to a culture marked by hatred, division, and the crumbling of older norms, standards, and institutions.⁸

Here I must pause in fresh amusement, for I cannot help but reach out to my favorite wit and literary benefactor for his sage and ever germane commentary. Some ninety years in the past, G.K. Chesterton wrote *Christendom in Dublin* (November 28, 1932). In it he opined on that infamous phrase which he then attributed to V.I. Lenin, though more accurately proposed by Karl Marx, that “religion is the opium of the people.” Chesterton, in his unique way, wrote that “Nobody who has been in Dublin for a week as I have been during the Eucharistic Congress, can doubt that Ireland is passionately religious. ... Nobody who has lived in England all his life, as I have, can doubt that modern England, with its many manly and

generous virtues, has become largely indifferent to religion. It follows, therefore, by the strict logic of Lenin, that the English are the best Bolsheviks in the world. To suppose anything else would be to indulge in the audacity, nay the blasphemy, of supposing that there is something wrong in the logic of Lenin.”

We must therefore believe, as best we can, that the Irishman has always been a tame and timid person; and that it is the Englishman who has always been “agin the Government.” The inference is that it is only by believing in God that we could possibly believe in the Government. But the truth is that it is only by believing in God that we can ever criticize the Government. Once abolish the God, and the Government becomes the God. The fact is written all across human history; but it is written most plainly across the recent history of Russia; which was created by Lenin. There the Government is the God, and all the more the God, because it proclaims aloud in accents of thunder, like every other God worth worshipping, the one essential commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods but Me.”

Lenin only fell into a slight error; he only got it the wrong way round. The truth is that Irreligion is the opium of the people. Wherever the people do not believe in something beyond the world, they will worship the world. But, above all, they will worship the strongest thing in the world. And, by the very nature of the Bolshevik and many other modern systems, as well as by the practical working of almost any system, the State will be the strongest thing in the world. The whole tendency of men is to treat the solitary State as the solitary standard. That men may protest against law, it is necessary that they should believe in justice; that they may believe in a justice beyond law, it is necessary that they should believe in a justice beyond the land of living men. You can impose the rule of the Bolshevik as you can impose the rule of the Bourbons; but it is equally an imposition. You can even make its subjects contented, as opium would make them contented. But if you are to have anything like divine discontent, then it must really be divine. Anything that really comes from below must really come from above.⁹

It was Saint Thomas More who first coined the word *utopia* in his Latin work of fiction and socio-political satire *Utopia* (1516). Derived from the Ancient Greek: οὐ (“not”) and τόπος (“place”), he used it to describe *any* non-existent society. He carefully pointed out the similarity of the word to *eutopia* (Greek: εὐτόπος), meaning “good place” which modern argot has bastardized to mean an idealized non-existent society, a heaven on earth. The antipode of *eutopia* is *dystopia*, meaning “bad place” best ex-

amined through the prescient lens of such dystopian future fictions as George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Isaac Asimov’s *The Naked Sun*, and E.M. Forster’s *The Machine Stops*.

Of the last, it is worth further examination, if not for its brevity then for its currency. At the dawn of the twentieth century, *The Century Magazine* reported with “absolute certitude” that one day people would “communicate with one another instantly irrespective of distance.... Not only this, but through television and telephone we shall see and hear one another as perfectly as though we were face to face.” According to Neil Postman, *Technopoly* (1993), the technocrats (Robber Barons) of the early days of the twentieth century were intent on depriving us of the past, “for their essential idea was that nothing is so much worth preserving that it should stand in the way of technological innovation.” E.M. Forster early on saw the looming sovereignty of the machine not as a utopian solution but as a probable dystopian nightmare, a final solution to rid the world of the pestilence of man.

Published in 1909, Forster’s *The Machine Stops* remarkably imagines much of the gadgetry we use in the second decade of the twenty-first century. You will not find the words “Zoom,” “Skype,” or “Instagram” in the story, but you will read about “glowing round plates” that allow people to communicate virtually, “speaking tubes,” and “pneumatic posts.”

While technological optimists living around 1909 would have seen these mechanisms as enhancements of human connectivity, Forster depicts them as dehumanizing. His achievement in *The Machine Stops* is that he took the themes of remembrance, family, nature, and religion and showed how a machine culture might ravage each one of them.¹⁰

Forster envisions a world where every individual is confined to a single cell-like room in a global underground structure resembling a beehive, each connected to a worldwide mechanical apparatus that provides all the necessities of life for each resident: temperature-controlled air, food, music, communications, entertainment, and clothing are provided at the touch of a button. People no longer “see” other people in the flesh, the very thought repulsive and repugnant.

The story centers on two characters, a mother and son, who live on opposite sides of the globe. Vashti, the

mother, spends her days in a comfortable motorized chair, from which she gives ten-minute lectures to a virtual audience via an electronic device, on subjects ranging from "Music during the Australian Period" to the French Revolution. One day her son, Kuno, calls her up with an unexpected request.

'I want you to come and *see* me," he insists.

"I *can* see you," Vashti says through the plate. "What more do you want?"

These lines establish the heart of the narrative. Kuno wants to experience the world without the restraints of the Machine, but his mother believes this wish is both futile and repulsive. For Vashti, seeing her son's face framed inside a glowing blue plate is both perfectly normal and perfectly adequate. At one point, she contemplates, "And if Kuno himself, flesh of her flesh, stood close beside her at last, what profit was there in that? No, she would have none of it, for it was contrary to the 'spirit of the age.'"

Unlike his mother, who has taken to praying to the Machine, [Kuno] refuses to give it homage. "Cannot you see," he asks her, "that it is we that are dying, and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine?" Vashti is aghast at her son's impiety, but he is persistent:

We created the Machine to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now. It has robbed us of the sense of space and of the sense of touch, it has blurred every human relation and narrowed down love to a carnal act, it has paralyzed our bodies, and our wills, and now it compels us to worship it.

In the world of *The Machine Stops*, experiential knowledge and memory are deemed untrustworthy, so a handful of lecturers interpret all historical events in accordance with the requirements of the Machine. The trivialization and distortion of historical knowledge keeps the populace ignorant of the actual events of the past.

This theme of distorting memory and history is found in other dystopias, notably George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. In *1984*, he "who controls the past controls the future" and he "who controls the present controls the past." Since the Party controls the present, no objective historical record exists. In *Brave New World*, the past is viewed as barbaric so that the authorities are justified in closing all the museums and blowing up all the historical monuments.

In Asimov's *The Naked Sun*, humans are few and self-

isolated, robots and technology attend to their individual needs, the idea of human-to-human interaction and physical, even proximate, contact repulsive, unthinkable.

The gravest pity of it all: we have no one to blame but ourselves. As W.H. Auden once wrote:

*We would rather be ruined than changed:
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
and let our illusions die.*

A world simply irreligious

It was Thomas Sowell who would speak of the ignorance of the educated when he wrote: "Of all ignorance, the ignorance of the educated is the most dangerous. Not only are educated people likely to have more influence, they are the last people to suspect that they don't know what they are talking about when they go outside their narrow fields." Elsewhere, he warned: "Ours may become the first civilization destroyed, not by the power of our enemies, but by the ignorance of our teachers and the dangerous nonsense they are teaching our children. In an age of artificial intelligence, they are creating artificial stupidity."

Likewise, what ought to be of the mind are the words of Paul (2 Timothy 4:3-4): "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths." It is in our nature to desire hearing good news; no one wants to hear that hardship and suffering in this life may be God's will and that judgment is certain after death. The truth is, like the decades old exercise proverb, "no pain, no gain," nothing worth having in this life comes without penalty or cost. Suffering tests the mettle, without the Cross there would be no salvation. "The Cross holds the key to everything. The sacrifice is all the teaching." Too many have forgotten that.

It was October 2, 1873, in the English village of Olton, at the dedication of a new Catholic seminary, St. Bernard's, when then Father (now Saint) John Henry Newman unexpectedly "described in stark terms the challenges future priests trained at St. Bernard's would face:"

I know that all times are perilous, and that in every time serious and anxious minds, alive to the honor of God and the needs of men, are apt to consider no times as perilous as their own. ... And all times have their special trials which others have not. And ... I will admit that there were certain specific dangers to Christians at certain other times, which do not exist in this time ... Still, I think that the trials which lie before us are such as would appall and make dizzy even such courageous hearts as St. Athanasius, St. Gregory [the Great], or St. Gregory VII. And they would confess that, dark as the prospect of their own day was to them severally, ours has a darkness different in kind from any that has gone before it ... [For] Christianity has never yet had the experience of a world simply irreligious.

George Weigel asks what Newman meant by “a world simply irreligious”? His answer? “What Newman meant ... was not, then, a world without religious believers. Rather, he meant a world in which biblical faith and the biblical view of human nature, human community, human origins, and human destiny no longer shaped culture, society, and public life in a decisive way. What Newman saw aborning was a flattened human landscape: a world without transcendent reference points of any sort.”

This was indeed something new. Biblical religion had long contended with false gods, superstitions, and heresies. Something different and ominous was now shaping the future, Newman suggested. What was coming was a claustrophobic world without windows, doors, or skylights; a world of spiritual emptiness that human beings could only organize against one another; a world in which the biblical view of the human person would be regarded as a grave threat to a more decent future. Such a world, Newman feared, would be far more inhumane than anything found in the classical world he knew so well. And that spiritually vacuous world would be all the more dangerous because of an unwarranted confidence in its power to facilitate personal happiness, a just society, and endless progress.

The “world simply irreligious” that Newman foresaw and that is now unmistakably with us in the sense he intended—a world without readily available transcendent reference points in both personal and public life—is not a world in which human beings can flourish, live freely and nobly, and create communities of solidarity. That is the crux of the crisis of world civilization today. For if Western civilization is so emptied of its foundational, constituting spiritual and moral ballast that it cannot lead world civilization into the future, other forces, hostile to freedom and bearing distorted notions of solidarity, will do so.¹¹

Weigel adds that there are no easy solutions, depending on public remedies will at best provide but temporary remedy. “The deeper problems we face would remain. For the crisis of the West in the mid-twenty-first century is only secondarily political. It is primarily cultural and spiritual.” In *The Next Pope: The Office of Peter and a Church in Mission* (Ignatius Press, 2020) Weigel sketched what a future Bishop of Rome might do for the ongoing reform and revitalization of Catholicism. In his lengthy essay for *First Things*, he widens the lens and asks how the papacy of the future might help the West recover from what most deeply ails us. He suggests four needs (here summarized) for the Church and the papacy:

We all need a countercultural papacy, challenging the Zeitgeist rather than reflecting it.

The challenge to read the signs of these postmodern times remains. Whatever answering that challenge might mean today, and whatever a dialogue between Catholicism and the postmodern world might involve, it cannot mean a surrender to the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age. If the Catholicism of the next decades were merely to reflect the spirit of the age—if the Church were to act as if it were another non-governmental organization in the business of good works—it would not only empty itself of its distinctive character and betray its constituting purpose; it would do the world no good service. The postmodern world, “a world simply irreligious,” may wish that the Catholic Church would go down the path pioneered by those liberal Protestant and Reform Jewish communities that have become religious simulacra of progressive NGOs. That would certainly cause less trouble for the world. But it is precisely a countercultural witness and a vigorous cultural challenge that the West needs today. The West needs a Catholic Church and a papacy that calls the West to recover the truths on which our civilization rests, as the basis of cultural renewal and social reform. None of us needs a Catholic Church reflecting a *Zeitgeist* that treats those foundational truths as poisonous.

We all need a papacy that affirms the goodness of creation, the givenness of things, and the true dignity of the human person.

The pope we all need will remind a world with a diminished sense of human possibility that biblical religion is a matter of encountering a personal mystery of love, in which we learn the deepest and most ennobling truths about the human condition. The pope we all need will confidently proclaim that, even amid the frightening silence of a world turned in upon itself, men and women can hear a divine word, enter into

communion with God of the Bible, and in doing so, “become sharers of the divine nature” (as Vatican II put it in its *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*). A pope who lifts up that striking affirmation—that human beings can rise above their fears to “become sharers of the divine nature”—will offer the twenty-first-century world a vision of human possibility far nobler and more compelling than the degrading notion, so prominent in the West today, that we are all merely twitching bundles of morally equal desires, the satisfaction of which exhausts the meaning of “human rights.” A pope who teaches that human beings are far more than congealed stardust, that we have an eternal destiny *beyond* history that illuminates the path to individual flourishing and social solidarity *within* history, will help revive within the West a true humanism of nobler conception and aspiration than anything offered by “a world simply irreligious,” in which humanity has no intentional origin, no noble destiny, and thus no path to take through history.

We all need a papacy that teach an adult understanding and exercise of freedom.

The pope we all need will explain and elevate before the world a far nobler concept of freedom. He will remind the world that freedom is a means to certain ends: to excellence, to happiness, and to the fulfillment of our human destiny—a fulfillment that cannot be reduced to the pleasure principle without vulgarizing the human condition. He will remind the world that freedom has to do with both our reason and our will: that freedom is the capacity to choose wisely what we can know, objectively, to be the good, and to act on that choosing as a matter of habit. The pope we all need will remind the world that the proper exercise of freedom is a growth in virtue, as we respond to the longing for truth, goodness, and happiness built into us.

In doing so, the pope we all need will teach us that freedom tethered to truth and ordered to goodness is the path beyond the social chaos being created throughout the West by a childish notion of freedom-as-willfulness. The pope we all need will teach us how an adult exercise of freedom leads to community and solidarity.

We all need a papacy that does not play international politics by Realpolitik rules.

The pope we all need will not play Realpolitik games with authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, because he will understand that such games only benefit tyrants while undermining the evangelical and moral credibility of the Church and the papacy. The pope we all need will be a voice for those who have no voice because they are locked in Cuban or Nicaraguan prisons, or because they are being brutalized in concentration camps in China’s Xinjiang province, or because they

have been reduced to penury in Venezuela.

Weigel concludes with a portion of William Faulkner’s 1950 Nobel Prize for literature acceptance speech:

I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last dingdong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking.

I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet’s, the writer’s, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet’s voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.

“As for the poet and writer, so for the priest who is the Bishop of Rome. The pope we all need is a pope who can say the things William Faulkner said in Stockholm in 1950, and say them from the far greater stage that is Rome.”

It ought not to be necessarily said, but implicit within Weigel’s *The Next Pope* and the most recent essay *The Pope We All Need* is the glaring truth that the current pope is not the pope the Church so desperately needs to instruct and guide the faithful in Christ’s plan of salvation. We would do well to remember that the essence of the Church, one of the four marks of the Church, is to be *apostolic*, built on the Apostles and their successors.

Why must this be so? It is because the very essence of the Church is to be a continuation of Christ’s humanity by which He can reach every human being on the planet throughout history. Christ’s physical body has ascended into heaven, so He cannot touch us directly in that visible humanity that He assumed in the moment of the Annunciation. Thus He instituted a plan of salvation in which His humanity continues in time and space through the sacraments. His direct contact with the members of His Church happens above all in the Eucharist and Penance, but it also happens in a no less important way through Holy Orders, the fullness of which is the episcopacy. The recipients of the fullness of this sacrament are the successors of the Apostles.

Through these “other Christs” the sacraments are celebrated and the faithful continue to be taught and governed by Christ Himself.¹² (*emphasis added*)

The primary *responsibility* of the episcopacy (bishops) as apostolic successors—indeed, it should be argued, their *only* responsibility—is to defend the faith and teach the faithful all that Christ had commanded. Pope Leo XIII, *Satis cognitum* §12, wrote, “He willed then that he whom He had designated as the foundation of the Church should be the defense of its faith.” Feingold adds, “The Petrine office is essentially that of conserving the faith, confirming the brethren in the faith and in the bond of charity, and of feeding *all* the sheep of Christ, maintaining in the bond of unity all the bishops scattered throughout the world.” More importantly, the primacy of Peter serves the Word of God. “Catholics understand the primacy to be entirely at the service of the Gospel. The task of the apostolic witness of the universal episcopacy and the Petrine witness of the bishop of Rome is to maintain the deposit of faith intact through all centuries so that all the faithful may have the freedom won for us by Christ.”

Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI), as Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, wrote and explained this beautifully in *The Primacy of the Successor of Peter in the Mystery of the Church*:

The Roman Pontiff—like all the faithful—is subject to the Word of God, to the Catholic faith, and is the guarantor of the Church’s obedience; in this sense he is *servus servorum Dei*. He does not make arbitrary decisions, but is spokesman for the will of the Lord, who speaks to man in the Scriptures lived and interpreted by Tradition; in other words, the *episkope* of the primacy has limits set by divine law and by the Church’s divine, inviolable constitution found in Revelation. The Successor of Peter is the rock which guarantees a rigorous fidelity to the Word of God against arbitrariness and conformism: hence the martyrological nature of his primacy.

The reason the “world is simply irreligious” is first and foremost a matter of ignorance: “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not” (John 1:10). The world knows him not because those who have been ordained by Christ to spread the good news, to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of

the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you,” (Matthew 28:19-20) have failed their Christological obligation to do so. The apostolic successors—not all, but far too many—have abrogated their sacred responsibilities, unlike the original apostles, too many lack the courage and conviction Christ demands of those he has ordained to lead his flock.

The reason the “world is simply irreligious” is simply because the people of God have not been taught by those to whom Christ commanded to teach. The lay “faithful” have not been strictly catechized (taught) by those so ordained to teach them. Tragically, the world has been left adrift in a sea of conflicting amoral visions, like Plato’s *Ship of Fools*: rudderless, leaderless, thus, “simply irreligious.”

Rather than catechize, many of today’s Church leaders have chosen to exercise raw power rather than faithfully practice their apostolic teaching authority. As one writer recently observed: “Unfortunately today, many Church leaders have power behind their commands, but not authority. They know that they can command obedience from most Catholics to their directives, and so they exercise power for their own sakes or for the sake of their ideology, instead of for the common good.”

Power comes from below—it is only possible if it has consent (whether forced or given freely) from the people under control. Joseph Stalin had power in the Soviet Union because no one below him dared resist him. Mikhail Gorbachev also had power, until the people of the Soviet Union no longer gave it to him.

Authority, on the other hand, comes from above, ultimately from God. A father or a bishop or even a Catholic monarch has authority in certain spheres given to him by God for the common good of his family, diocese, or kingdom, respectively. Those under authority are obliged to follow the superior’s commands, not because of their consent, but because the authority ultimately comes from the One who has true authority over all.

Due to the Fall, power can become virtually unlimited in this world, through force or influence. What could Stalin *not* do during his reign? A person with power also usually wants to acquire more power. As Lord Acton noted, “power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Being able to tell people what to do can be intoxicating.

Authority, on the other hand, is always limited in scope. Only God has unlimited authority, and He only delegates aspects of his authority to individuals as needed to bring people closer to Him.

And it's important to note that this limitation applies to *everyone* with earthly—including ecclesial—authority, for only God Himself has full authority over man, as St. Thomas Aquinas notes, “Man is subject to God simply as regards all things, both internal and external, wherefore he is bound to obey Him in all things. On the other hand, inferiors are not subject to their superiors in all things, but only in certain things and in a particular way” (ST Pt. II-II, Q 105, Art. 5).

Vatican I recognized these limitations in office of the papacy as well. It states,

For the holy Spirit was promised to the successor of Peter not so that they might, by his revelation, make known some new doctrine, but that, by his assistance, they might religiously guard and faithfully expound the revelation or deposit of faith transmitted by the apostles.

Legitimate papal authority, in other words, is exercised when the pope “religiously guards and faithfully expounds the revelation or deposit of faith transmitted by the apostles.” But it’s an illegitimate exercise of power when he tries to “make known some new doctrine.” Even a pope has limited authority in the Church, although in modern practice he has almost unlimited power. And if a pope has only limited *authority*, then surely so do bishops and priests as well.

Problems arise when leaders mistake their God-given authority for power. They abuse their authority because they have the power to get away with it. So the abusive father is able to command his children far beyond his authority, because his children are unable to resist him. He has power over them. A bishop decides he can do whatever he wants—reassign priests he doesn’t like, use diocesan funds for private jet trips—because he has the power to do so.

Our Lord strongly condemned this abuse of authority through the illegitimate exercise of raw power:

You know that the princes of the Gentiles lord it over them; and they that are the greater, exercise power upon them. It shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be the greater among you, let him be your minister, and he that will be first among you, shall be your servant (Matthew 20:25-27).

True authority, which comes from God, is always put in the service of those under the ruler. St. Gregory the Great will understand this, saying that “Whoever call himself universal bishop, or desires the title, is, by his

pride, the precursor to the Antichrist” and instead called his role as pope “the Servant of the Servants of God.”¹³

The reason the “world is simply irreligious” is that the Church does not demand enough of its people. In a conversation between Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson and Bishop Robert Barron, Peterson made this astute observation, “Look, the Church demands everything of you, absolutely everything. And the reason that people are leaving is because that adventure isn’t being put before them.” There are obvious reasons for the mass exodus from the pews, but by all appearances, Church leadership has neither the eyes to see nor the will to lead. Clement Harrold notes that the evidence is laid bare and people are simply finding irreligion more comfortable. He says, “Within this context, the Holy Father’s comments back in September regarding the distribution of Holy Communion to pro-abortion politicians were not particularly surprising.”

For what they betrayed was the already rife assumption that one’s salvation is assured—or at least highly probable—*regardless* of one’s sins and *regardless* of whether one is baptized. On this account, anybody can and should receive Holy Communion because such antiquated concepts as “mortal sin” and “state of grace” don’t matter anymore.

Needless to say, Pope Francis is not alone in his views; for multiple decades now, these same suppositions about the optionality of sanctifying grace have functioned as the new *de facto* dogma for most of the hierarchy. The result has been to create exactly the kind of hackneyed, turbid Church that Peterson laments. For if more or less everybody is saved regardless of the condition of their souls, then the importance of persevering in a state of grace becomes radically diminished. But if this is so, then what exactly, we must ask, is the Church for?

The views of the most important theologian of the past 60 years, Pope Benedict XVI, are indicative. They are also perplexing. In a notable homily from 1964, then-Father Ratzinger defined the problem:

The question that torments us is, much rather, that of why it is still actually necessary for us to carry out the whole ministry of the Christian faith—why, if there are so many other ways to heaven and to salvation, should it still be demanded of us that we bear, day by day, the whole burden of ecclesiastical dogma and ecclesiastical ethics?

As Ratzinger's musings make clear, this issue cannot be considered as merely one theological puzzle among many. On the contrary, this is *the* defining questions, not just for our age but for every age. It is the decisive question as to what the *raison d'être* of the Church consists of. And it is precisely our collective failure to provide a compelling answer to this question that has been at the heart of much of the decline we have experienced over the past 60 years.

For too long we have bewailed declining Mass attendance and growing institutional corruption while ignoring the elephant in the room—or, perhaps more aptly, the dragon in the presbytery—which is summed up in our inability to articulate what the Church is for. ... Looking to Sacred Scripture, I would venture to suggest that there we discover a twofold solution. On the one hand, put negatively, it is abundantly clear that the mission or *télos* of the Church is to prevent you and me from being eternally damned, because Hell is real and people actually go there. This truth is affirmed literally dozens of times in all four Gospels as well as the epistles and especially in the book of Revelation. Verses such as Jude 1:7 establish it beyond reasonable doubt.

On the other hand, put more positively, the mission of the Church is to provide mankind with the perfection of supernatural life, a life that will be fulfilled in the world to come but that begins in the here and now. This theme is especially prominent in the Johannine corpus, but it also finds expression in, for example, Matthew 5:48: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

For the first 1,900 years of the Church's history, this approach was taken for granted. It was an approach which prompted souls to personal conversion and which inspired the community of believers in their missionary efforts. It was an approach that took the Great Commission seriously because it could provide a cogent explanation as to why that commission mattered. Compare this to the compromised sacramental life and ersatz evangelism of today and the contrast becomes stark.¹⁴

Harrold's observation that our inability to articulate what the Church is for is the most existential question for the Church today. Thus, the question begs another: What is the purpose behind Pope Francis' call "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission" solemnly opened in Rome on October 9-10, 2021 to be concluded on October 17, 2022. Pope Francis' official statement is far from clear:

By walking together, and together reflecting on the journey made, the Church will be able to learn from

what it will experience which processes can help it to live communion, to achieve participation, to open itself to mission.

The Preparatory Document offers only a vague proposition as to purpose, one which leaves us wondering who is supposed to be leading who? There is a serious absence of any mention of faith and doctrinal teaching, its primary vision is one of "journeying together," to where, is never addressed.

2. A basic question prompts and guides us: How does this "journeying together," which takes place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?

Addressing this question together requires listening to the Holy Spirit, who like the wind "blows where it will; you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (Jn 3:8), remaining open to the surprises that the Spirit will certainly prepare for us along the way. Thus, a dynamism is activated that allows us to begin to reap some of the fruits of a synodal conversion, which will progressively mature.

The preparatory document is 26 pages of unintelligible "synodality", a term which even Cardinal Timothy Dolan is at a loss to explain. Perhaps the most irrational issue surrounding this Synod on Synodality is the call for local church laity to participate in "listening sessions" based on two questions:

1. How is this "journeying together: happening today in the local Diocese?
2. What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our "journeying together"?

In the *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality, the *Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches* (41 pages,) the reader will find a trove of progressive tropes to chew on. Here are just a few:

In this sense, it is clear that the purpose of this Synod is not to produce more documents. Rather, it is intended to inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be, to make people's hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper

relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission (PD, 32). Thus the objective of this Synodal Process is not only a series of exercises that start and stop, but rather a journey of growing authentically towards the communion and mission that God calls the Church to live out in the third millennium.

Kumbaya. I dare anyone to explain what was just said. This is clearly an attempt to allow the uncatechized to pretend they know what they have never been taught and to grant legitimacy to the failures of the hierarchy to do what Christ commanded they do. But wait! There is more and it gets better.

Participation: A call for the involvement of all who belong to the People of God—laity, consecrated and ordained—to engage in the exercise of deep and respectful listening to one another. This listening creates space for us to hear the Holy Spirit together, and guides our aspirations for the Church in the Third Millennium. **Participation is based on the fact that all the faithful are qualified** (*emphasis added*) and are called to serve one another through the gifts they have each received from the Holy Spirit. In a synodal Church the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called together to *pray, listen, analyze, dialogue, discern and offer advice on making pastoral decisions* which correspond as closely as possible to God's will (ICT, Syn., 67068). **Genuine efforts must be made to ensure the inclusion of those at the margins or who feel excluded.** (*emphasis added*)

Sounds thoroughly heretical to this disciple. Anyone can say and believe anything because "all the faithful are qualified." Imagine how Arius, Constantine-Silvanus, the Bogomils, the Cathars, Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, Jon Hus, Martin Luther and other heretics must now feel. Why should any Catholic feel compelled to remain with the Catholic Church? Why should anyone remain religious? If all are qualified, why concern oneself with the transcendent, the spiritual, with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? It is apparently enough to journey together—to where? Who can say? Does anybody really care? After all, everyone is saved.

Perhaps, rather than a, the laity might demand the successors to the apostles do as Christ commanded: "Go and make disciples of all nations, ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Now, that would

certainly be a faith to believe in.

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13. Eric Sammons, "Power vs. Authority in the Church", Crisis Magazine, <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2021/power-vs-authority-in-the-church>, December 30, 2021.
14. Clement Harrold, "A Church Without Purpose", Crisis Magazine, <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2021/a-church-without-purpose>, November 29, 2021.

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

Things Worth Dying For

Charles J. Chaput

Henry Holt and Company

2021, 258 pages.

Homo Americanus

Zbigniew Janowski

St. Augustine's Press

2021, 259 pages.

Voyage to Alpha Centauri: A Novel

Michael D. O'Brien

Ignatius Press

2013, 587 pages.

The Everlasting Man

G.K. Chesterton

Dover Publications

2007, 270 pages.

Speechless:

Controlling Words, Controlling Minds

Michael Knowles

Regnery Publishing

2021, 362 pages.

Knowledge and Decisions

Thomas Sowell

Basic Books

1980, 422 pages.

Intellectuals and Society

Thomas Sowell

Basic Books

2011, 669 pages.

Enemies of the Permanent Things

Russell Kirk

Sherwood Sugden & Company

1984-88, 311 pages.

PERIODICALS

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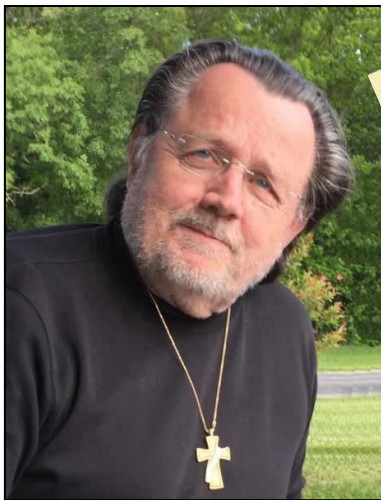
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Deacon Chuck Lanham is a Catholic author, columnist, speaker, theologian and philosopher, a jack-of-all-trades like his father (though far from a master of anything) and a servant of God. He is the author of **The Voices of God: Hearing God in the Silence**, **Echoes of Love: Effervescent Memories** and has written over 500 essays on religion, faith, morality, theology, and philosophy.

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The surface of the
earth is 71% water and
none of it is
carbonated. Therefore,
the Earth is flat.



Covid 19 is not your enemy, fear is. You will not die one day sooner or one day later than God has planned for you. But he did not create you to live in fear. The Bible says "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." 2 Timothy 1:7

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