

LIVING BULWARK

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sources of strength and renewal for Christian life and mission in today's world

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Saints and Sinners

"The wages of sin is death – but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ "(Romans 6:23)

- [The Great Downfall](#), by Steve Clark
- [A Mirror to see Inside Ourselves](#), by Gregory the Great (540-604 AD)
- [Your Mountain of Sins Will Never be too High](#), by Cyril of Jerusalem (349-386 AD)
- [Why Does God Allow Temptation?](#) by Maximus & [Dead to Sin](#), by Chrysostom

Words of Welcome

- [Building Bridges - Person to Person Evangelism](#), by Jim Berlucchi
- [Do the doors of our heart say "welcome" or "go away"?](#) by Dave Quintana

Living Faith

- [Living a Life of Unity in London](#), by Andy Pettman
- [Embracing the "Present,"](#) by Beth Melchor

Grace & Mercy

- [Living Under the Grace of God](#), by Tom Caballes
- [The Pharisee and the Tax Collector: "Be Merciful to Me, O God,"](#) by Jeanne Kun

Unfolding Love

- [Forgiveness](#) by Ana, [God's City](#) by Mark, [Healing](#) by Anna, & [Home](#) by Mikayla
- [Discovering Our True Destiny](#) and [Dark Was the Night](#), by Stephen Bick

Confessing Him

- [Confessions](#): Excerpts from Augustine's autobiography, and [Prayer of Augustine](#)
- [My Confession](#), by St. Patrick of Ireland, and [Song of Patrick](#), by Ed Conlin

Humble Strength

- [Saints or Sinners?](#) by Jerry Bridges, & [Discipline of Confession](#), by Richard Foster
- [The Danger of "I Would Never Do That,"](#) by Sam Williamson

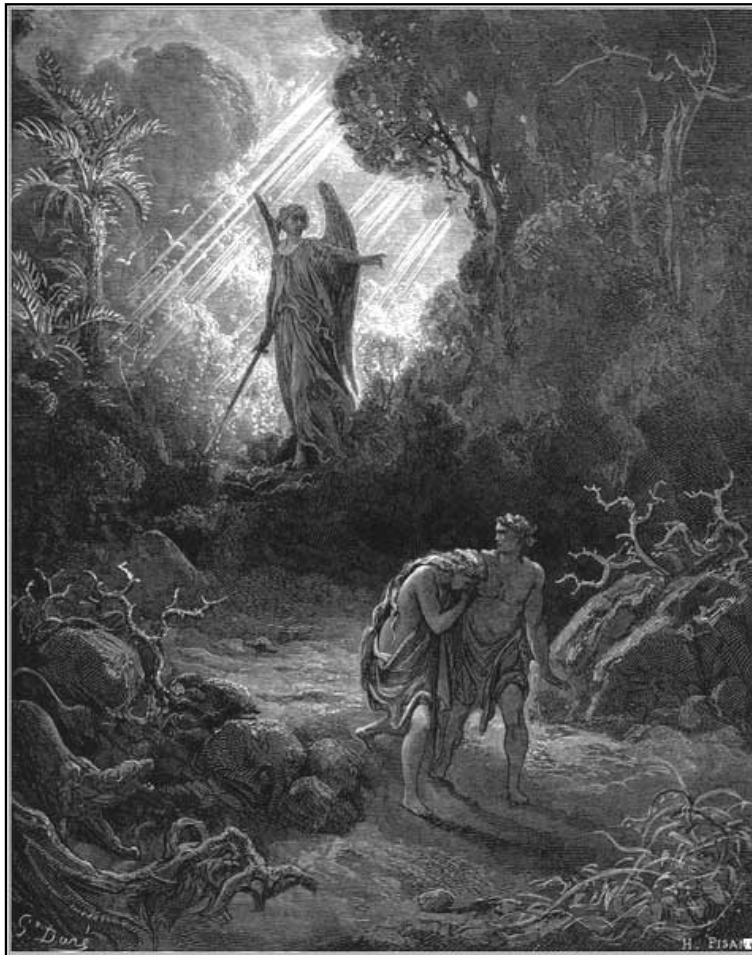
Creative Works

- [Spring Forward - An Artist's Sampler: >1, >2, >3](#), watercolors by Ros Yates
- [The Red Madonna: An Interview with Author Michael Shaughnessy](#), and [excerpt](#)

Living Bulwark is committed to fostering renewal of the whole Christian people: Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. We especially want to give witness to the charismatic, ecumenical, evangelistic, and community dimensions of that renewal. Living Bulwark seeks to equip Christians to grow in holiness, to apply Christian teaching to their lives, and to respond with faith and generosity to the working of the Holy Spirit in our day.

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The Great Downfall

by Steve Clark

God created the human race with great care and established it in a way that gave high hopes for the future. Adam was like a young man of good family, a favored son who received the best education available, who was betrothed or married to a woman of equal background. The son of God should have had a good prospect for his life.

But as we know from experience, not all such young people do well. Adam did not. Along with Eve, he ended up driven out of paradise by God with no chance of return. Facing a life of poverty and hard work, Adam turned out something of a failure. Having undergone what Christians have called “the fall”, Adam and Eve were in a predicament of great magnitude.

One time when I was hiking in the mountains, I turned the bend and saw a man sitting, half lying, by the side of the trail. At first I thought he was just resting. But when I reached him, I found that he could hardly move. This man had twisted his ankle and fallen. He was waiting for a friend to come back with help. Ironically, he was young and strong and an experienced hiker. It never should have happened, but there he was. It did not occur to me at the time, but he made a good image of the human race as we see it at the end of the third chapter of Genesis — fallen, unable to help

itself.

Some image like that of the hiker at the side of the trail is behind the use of the word “fall”. The Scriptures use this word to speak about many human setbacks or disasters. When David heard of the defeat and death of King Saul and his son Jonathan, the refrain of his lament was, “How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!” (2 Sam 1:25). Here “fall” refers to defeat and destruction. In a similar way, in view of the siege of Babylon by the army of Medes and its sudden capitulation, a prophecy in Jeremiah proclaims: “Suddenly Babylon has fallen and been broken; wail for her!” (Jer 51:8). Her domination, her future prospects of wealth and prosperity, are all gone.

The word “fall” is used more broadly than for defeats in war. A proverb says, “A righteous man falls seven times, and rises again...” (Prov 24:16). It is speaking about various failures a righteous man has to endure, and probably has moral failures in mind. Because they are a kind of defeat, moral failures can be described as “falls”. We are warned by the Apostle Paul, “Let anyone who thinks that he stands, take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor 10:12). In view of all the possible kinds of falls, we are instructed by Ecclesiastes, “Two are better than one, because...if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up” (Eccl 4:9-10).

We do not speak about the fall of a snake, and do not think much about the fall of a four-legged animal like a dog or a cow. But because normal human posture is erect, a fall is very important for human beings. If they fall and cannot rise, they become unable to walk or run. A fall is a kind of predicament, at least when it is not complete ruin.

The phrase “the fall of the human race” or “the downfall of the human race” as it might better be translated, sums up the great failure that produced the predicament we are now in. The human race had been created in the image and likeness of God, filled with glory, established as the ruler of material creation, with an even better future in store. Yet it ended up in exile, banished by God, having suffered a great loss. How had such a great defeat happened?

The downfall of the human race was not an accident. Nor did it happen because God changed his mind. It was not even the result of a great enemy overpowering Adam and Eve and destroying paradise. It happened because of something human beings did. “The man” had “put forth his hand” (Gen 3:22) to take the one thing his Father had com-manded him not to take. He had, to use a familiar word, “sinned”.

“Sin” is one of many words used in the Bible to speak about moral failures or wrongdoing. Through a lengthy historical process, it became the main word used in Christian teaching to refer to the failures of people to live the way they should. “Sin” especially refers to those failures as offenses against God. When we say that people have sinned, we usually mean that they have done something that God has forbidden.

We also use the word “sin” in other ways. When we speak about human beings who live in a way not pleasing to God, we say they are living in sin. “Sin” here refers to the state of sin, the state of someone who lacks a good relationship with God. In addition, when we speak about tendencies inside human beings that cause them to commit sins, we also use the word “sin.” We say their bad actions were caused by their sin or their “sinfulness”. As we go on, we will be more concerned with the state of sin and with sinfulness. At the outset, we have to look primarily at sinful actions.

According to Christian teaching, sins are the main cause of the human predicament. They are the reason the human race cannot reach its intended purpose. That teaching stems from Genesis chapter 3, which describes the first sin and presents it as the one that caused the downfall of the human race. The first sin, however, was more than just the cause of the fallen state of the race. It was also the prototype or “model” of all subsequent sin. Genesis, in other words, describes the first sin in a way that allows us to understand the na-ture of all sin.

The “Model” Sin

The Test

Genesis 2 contains some important words that God said to unfallen human beings:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying,

You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die. Gen 2:15-17

Here we come to a controversial point. Why did God command Adam (and Eve, probably through him) to avoid the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil? The view of the serpent as presented in Genesis 3:1-15 was that God wanted to keep the human race in a state of inferiority. This view has been expressed in other ways by modern people who claim that Christianity retards the advance of the human race or acts as the opiate of the people. The serpent’s view is certainly plausible. After all, why should God forbid the first human beings to eat fruit that gave something as good as wisdom?



One of the best answers given by Christian commentators is that the prohibition was intended to be only temporary. The knowledge of good and evil was something good that the tree conferred, something God wanted the human race to have, but something that should only come in a certain way. Adam first needed to acquire age and experience before he could eat of the tree safely. He needed to be taught the “fear of the Lord” (Ps 34:11).

The “fear of the Lord” is the respect for God that leads to obedience to him. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9:10). True wisdom comes through knowing that only what God holds to be good is truly good and that what God commands is good to follow — even when we do not understand why he commands it. It is based on a commitment to God’s teaching over any rival forms of teaching, on a trust in its goodness, and on a willingness to accept the limits he imposes to protect us when our own wisdom is inadequate.

Without fear of the Lord and personal maturity, knowledge, especially when manifested in increasing power and mastery of the world, can lead to destruction. We have only to consider modern warfare. Here human beings have the knowledge that can cause tremendous destruction without the wisdom that ensures its use for good rather than evil purposes.

Knowledge without fear of God can also lead to evil effects in a person. It can lead to pride, the belief that one can determine what is good and evil for oneself, or to seeking wisdom for self-glorification at the expense of greater goods (Ezek 28:1-10). To many it can be said, “You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor” (Ezek 28:17).

To protect his newly created son, God commanded Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam first needed to learn obedience. Like a good father, God probably intended to lay the foundation of Adam’s wisdom — to “teach him torah” — so that Adam might then eat of the tree and acquire more wisdom on his own. Such an understanding of the need to acquire knowledge of good and evil in the right way probably lies behind Paul’s instruction in Romans 16:19. Alluding to the tree of knowledge, he exhorts Christians to be wise as to what is good and blameless [RSV: guileless] as to what is evil. They should not, in other words, acquire knowledge of good and evil by doing evil.

In such an understanding, eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would eventually have been part of the process by which God formed his son, and with him the human race, to govern his creation, making of it something good, completely free from evil. Adam would then have been able to act like his Father, the Lord God. He would have been in his Father’s image and likeness not just because of his natural capability, but even more because of his formation and character.

The account in Genesis implies that Adam had received enough instruction to know how to conduct himself, at least how to conduct himself in regard to the tree of knowledge at that point in his development. If, however, Adam’s instruction was to be complete, it had to involve undergoing a test. Genesis 3 is the account of the great test that came to the human race. In line with the interpretation of the Genesis narrative we have been following, that test is best understood as part of God’s plan.

The Hebrew and Greek words that are normally translated “test” are sometimes also translated “temptation”. The account in Genesis 3, in fact, is commonly described as the temptation of Adam and Eve. In English, we use the word “temptation” when a test involves an inducement to do wrong and when it is clear which choice we ought to make. The focus in the English word on the presence of possible wrongdoing, however, can obscure the fact that someone who has fallen to temptation is someone who has failed a test.

The word “test”, however, can also be problematic. If we say that Adam had to pass a test in the course of being educated by his Father, what comes to mind most readily is a test in the modern school or university. Such a test provides a way for a teacher to find out whether the pupils have acquired the necessary information or not. They respond to questions or do exercises that show what is in their mind.

Such a view of a test is misleading as an understanding of the events in Genesis 3. It is misleading, first of all, because Genesis 3 describes a test of wisdom. Wisdom, in the most common scriptural sense, is not primarily theoretical information, knowledge that can be written on a piece of paper about what is right and wrong. Wisdom involves the ability to live and act well, to make choices that are good and just. Wisdom is not proved through the ability to answer questions, but through the ability to handle concrete situations in which there is an issue about good and evil. Moral maturity, according to Hebrews 5:14, is being “trained by practice to distinguish good from evil”. Any test of Adam’s wisdom and his fear of the Lord would have to involve a practical situation in which a choice

was needed.

There is a further way in which the test Adam underwent was different from tests in modern schools. In the ancient world, tests were not used simply to determine whether pupils had completed the educational process adequately. Rather, they were seen as an actual part of the educational process, as a way to learn, because wisdom, or any practical knowledge, cannot be acquired apart from action.

Young people can go through instructions, but until they play real games, they have not learned a sport, and until they fight real battles they are not warriors. When James says, “when you meet various temptations [RSV: trials]... you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (Jam 1:2-3), he is reflecting the scriptural view that character, the ability to live a good life, is only produced by testing. When the discourse of Moses in the book of Deuteronomy tells us that God tested the children of Israel “to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not” (Deut 8:2), he probably was taking the view that only in choosing to obey, especially in situations of difficulty, was obedience actually established.

If we accept such a view of testing, we cannot be said to be fully moral or faithful until we have come successfully through temptation. We could even say that it is not clear what is in our hearts until we make real life choices and adopt and hold to certain courses of action in the face of challenges or difficulties. If God wanted a son who could rule over creation, that son would have to undergo a real test. He would have to handle a situation on his own, but handle it rightly, in the way his Father taught him. By choosing well and following God’s commandments, Adam and Eve would become the people they were meant to be. But of course, a choice is no choice at all unless there is a real alternative, nor is a test a real test unless there is the possibility of failure. In other words, to be what God intended them to be, Adam and Eve had to decide not to sin.



The External Source

The account of the first sin is found in the third chapter of Genesis:

Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman,
 Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden’?
 And the woman said to the serpent,
 We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’
 But the serpent said to the woman,
 You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Gen 3:1-5

Here we see the dynamics of the first sin, the archetypal sin, portrayed in narrative form. At the outset of the chapter, we see the serpent, the one who originates the idea of sinning. The incitement to sin, in other words, came from

outside Adam and Eve. It was a challenge they were presented with.

The serpent is a strange figure, a talking reptile who convinces Eve to take a sinful course of action. In the Book of Revelation, we find the serpent identified as “Satan” (Rev 12:9). A being of angelic nature, Satan appears from time to time in the Old Testament as someone who seeks to bring harm to human beings because of their guilt or possible guilt. He is the “accuser”, the attorney for the prosecution, the opponent of human beings in the great trial that is the earthly life. He seeks to get human beings condemned and so ruined. In identifying Satan with the serpent, Revelation is following a tradition probably also found in the Book of Wisdom, written in the first century B.C., where it says: “Through the devil’s envy, death entered the world” (Wis 2:24).

Satan’s role in the downfall of the human race raises many questions. How did he become the sort of being who would want to cause the downfall of the human race? How did he himself fall? Revelation 12 seems to tell us that the history behind Satan’s appearance happened in heaven and not in this material creation. It also indicates that Satan was not alone, but the leader of angels who were in rebellion against God. Here we need to limit ourselves to a simple consideration of Genesis 2 and 3, but the fact that Satan was a rebel against God is important for the Christian understanding of what follows.

To rebel against his Creator and rightful Lord, a mighty angelic prince like Satan had to be filled with pride. In other words, he had to be filled with the desire to be God’s equal and not subject to him. When manifested in rebellion, pride regularly expresses itself in hostility toward the target of rebellion. Throughout human history, then, Satan is a rebel and an enemy of God.

As an enemy of God, Satan is also an enemy of God’s son, Adam, and of the human race. The Book of Wisdom says he acted in the temptation “out of envy”. Perhaps his envy stemmed from resentment at seeing another being favored the way he himself had been. Satan may have expected Adam to take the place from which he himself had fallen. Perhaps his envy was just the expression of hate for a rival or potential rival. Whatever his motivation, Satan wanted the human race to disobey God and so be subject to the stated punishment for disobeying the command of God — death. As Christ put it, Satan’s actions were those of a murderer (Jn 8:44) because he sought to kill the as yet innocent hu-man race.

The conversation between Satan and Eve reveals something further about Satan’s influence on the first sin. We discover that his words do not seem hostile to the human race. Satan presents himself as a friend, a knowledgeable friend, one who knows more about the human condition than Eve. Even more, he presents himself as someone who knows that God has spoken falsely to Adam and Eve.

Eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil will not produce death, but just what the name of the tree seems to indicate: greater knowledge or wisdom, and hence equality with God. God does not hold his position by an intrinsic excellence no creature can attain, but by knowledge that can be had for the asking, or better, for the eating. Knowledge is power. Enough power is equality. Eve can have all that by reaching out and eating of the fruit.

Eve believed Satan, but later, confronted by God as the judge, she is quite clear that she has not become equal to the Lord of all. She then confesses, “The serpent beguiled me” (Gen 3:13). Her words are sometimes translated “he tricked me” or “he deceived me.” Eve had learned an important truth through the results of her conversation with Satan: sin is a result of deception that originates in the influence of Satan.

Few human beings have experienced Satan or any other demonic being appearing to them and trying to persuade them to sin. The New Testament, however, tells us that Satan is the ruler of “this world”, that is, of fallen human society that has not yet been redeemed. It also tells us that his “rule” is manifested in various doctrines, religions,

and theories that lead human beings to sin. We will consider Satan himself more fully further on. At this point, we simply need to see that his influence comes to us from the various voices in society that lead human beings to sin.

Satan did not use force to overpower Adam and Eve, and he does not use force to overcome other human beings. He seeks a choice on the part of human beings — the choice of disobedience to God expressed in disobedience to his instructions. To attain his goal Satan makes false statements about God and the consequences of disobeying God. Sin, in other words, involves choosing falsehood rather than accepting what God has said. It is based, at least implicitly, on disbelief, rejection of God's Word.

The Inner Source

The account in Genesis then turns to Eve's response to the influence of the serpent.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Gen 3:6

This passage portrays the way sin originates inside a human being. The external agent succeeded only because he was an effective motivator who knew how to arouse something inside Eve to get her to do what he wanted. When she heard the words of Satan, Eve looked up to the tree to see its fruit. She could tell it would be nourishing. She saw it was attractive, enticing to look at. And she now understood that it would produce a beneficial change in her — wisdom.

Something awoke inside of Eve. The first letter of John, probably referring to this passage, describes what was happening inside of Eve as “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life” (1 Jn 2:16). “Pride of life” seems to mean the desire to be something great or to live at a higher station.

The cause of sin inside of Eve, then, was desires of various sorts. But is desire bad? After all, the contents of paradise were all very good (Gen 1:31), and all the trees in it were “pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Gen 2:9), probably including the tree of knowledge. The fruit of the tree that was now tempting Eve is purposely described in Genesis with many of the same words used to describe the original creation. The tempting fruit, in other words, had been made good and fulfilling by God.

Just as importantly, the desires Eve experienced were also created in her by God. The desire to eat what may have been the world's most luscious and nourishing fruit was a good desire. Even the desire to be wise, to be as great and noble as possible, can be good. To push the point further, even the desire to be “like God” could be good, since God wants humans to imitate him (Eph 5:1) and be partners with him in ruling his creation (Gen 1:26).

Eve's desires were starting to move her to a wrong choice, but they were not, in themselves, bad desires. She was not even experiencing her sinful human nature at work, because she did not have a sinful human nature. Eve had not yet fallen. She was a human being the way God created human beings to be, responding to something that God had made good and desirable. Yet in so doing, Eve sinned and Adam sinned with her.

Sometimes we hear about people who seem to take great pleasure in torturing and killing other human beings, often innocent children, or animals, or who take pleasure in wanton destruction of nature. We might consider these actions the paradigm case of sin, sheer evil or desire for what is in no way good. But these are expressions of a nature far gone in the corrupting results of sin — either the sin of those who do such deeds, or the sin of their parents or others who have made them to be what they are, Satan not the least. Such actions are not the disease as first caught but the

disease in its last stages, morally destroying the being in whom it lives. The paradigm case of sin is rather the first sin, the sin that caused the downfall of the human race.

Here we have arrived at an important truth about the nature of sin. Sin is a parasite that grows on God's good creation. It is something good gone wrong. In the first sin, a good person with healthy desires responded to something good created by God, but made the fatal mistake of approaching it in a way that violated the right kind of relationship with God.

Eve sought something God wanted for her — to be wise and to be more like him — but in a way that rebelled against the truth of her creaturehood. We cannot relate to God well except on the basis of the reality of who he is and who we are. We need to acknowledge that we are not the source of our own being or of the good things that come to us. We have to accept the limits involved in being a creature. We therefore need to respond in gratitude to the one who has created us out of his goodness and to live in a way that is pleasing to the one who is willing to keep us in existence. Wisdom requires the acceptance of reality as it is, especially the reality of who he is and who we are. Only on such a basis can human beings grow in wisdom and become like God.

Sinful actions, then, do not have to be evil through and through to be seriously sinful. They simply need to violate the relationship with God by doing something he has made clear he cannot accept. Consequently, of their very nature they break the relationship with him. Normally, a human action does need to be seriously evil in itself to break the relationship with God. It needs to be an action like murder, adultery, or idolatry. Such was not the case with the transgression of Adam and Eve. Eating the fruit of a tree is not intrinsically evil. Under other circumstances, such an action would have been good.

An action that was not intrinsically evil was probably chosen because of its fitness to represent the essence of all sin: disobedience, disordered choice, failure to live in unity with the one who created us and who made a certain kind of life good for his human creatures to live. To choose to do something that could be good, but to do it when God has forbidden it, is to choose to do evil.

This leads us back once again to the central truth about sin. Sin comes from outside, external influences. Sin also comes from the inside, the internal desires of human nature that are capable of embracing good and evil. But sin is ultimately the choice or decision of the sinner to act in a way that destructively damages the purpose for which every human being is created: the love of God. Sin is a failure of the sinner — and usually in the face of a test.

The Consequences

A recent newspaper article told of a little girl who had disregarded her mother's warning to stay away from the street. She had been hit by a car and ended up in the hospital with an injury that would cripple her for the rest of her life. Simply crossing the street seems trivial, certainly not intrinsically wrong. Yet that step involved rejecting the instructions given by her mother to protect her. Despite the warning, it also involved much greater consequences than the little girl ever imagined before she stepped off the curb or than we would have expected if we had only been told that a little girl crossed the street against her mother's orders.

In the previous section, we looked at the first human sin as the pattern or prototype of that problematic interaction with God that is at the root of human misfortune. Now we will look at the way Genesis presents the first sin as affecting the subsequent state of the human race. The significance of sin begins to appear immediately after the first sinful act, but much of what happened in the fall becomes clear only in the light of the later course of the human race.

The Judgment

No sooner had Adam and Eve eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, than the consequences began to unfold.

The eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, Where are you?
And he said,
I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” Gen 3:7-10

Once Adam and Eve had eaten of the fruit they immediately realized that something was wrong. Even more significantly, they realized that something was wrong with themselves. They experienced themselves as naked and ashamed. They were conscious that their actions had affected their relationship with God, and they began to be afraid of him.

John Chrysostom described the result of the transgression of the first human beings by saying, “Through their guilt they consequently divested themselves of the glory surrounding them” (*Homilies on Genesis* 16,14). He first speaks of the guilt that came from having disobeyed God’s commandment. He then indicates the result, a loss of glory. In doing so, he sums up a truth that Genesis presents in narrative form: sin led to a change in the human race.

Seriously evil actions result in a sinful state. Christian teachers have described the change of state Adam and Eve underwent in a variety of ways. Sometimes they say Adam and Eve lost their “innocence.” We tend to understand that word to mean the kind of innocence children have, unaware of good and evil and in a certain way incapable of sin (or, for that matter, virtue). “Innocence” in this sense is a synonym of “naïveté”. As applied to the human race before the fall, however, “innocence” means rather that Adam and Eve were free of guilt, blameless in their conduct, able to be in God’s presence without profaning his holiness. Now they had lost that innocence.

Sometimes Christian teachers say that Adam and Eve lost their “original righteousness” or “original justice”. That phrase means that they lost the good or right relationship with God given them by their origin, that is, by the very way God made them. Along with this, they lost their habitual goodness of conduct. As a consequence of the fall, Adam and Eve were left in a bad relationship with God, a state of alienation or separation. As Isaiah puts it, “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that he does not hear” (Isa 59:2).

In the above quote Chrysostom, following a common Jewish and early Christian understanding, also indicates that the guilt of Adam and Eve resulted in the loss of their glory, by which he meant an exterior radiance that clothed them in a personal splendor. Their external glory, as we have seen, came from an inner glory or power that enabled Adam and Eve to rule themselves, to control their actions, to be people of good character. No longer in good relationship with God and no longer subject to him, they were no longer able to keep themselves in subjection and to direct their actions in consistently good ways. They had lost that interior excellence and moral greatness that comes from being in the image and likeness of God in an unmarred way. With it, they had lost a mastery of themselves and became subject to their own desires, prone to sin. That, Chrysostom tells us, was visible exteriorly in the loss of their glory.

God did not need to especially intervene to punish Adam and Eve. Punishment had already begun in the form of the evil consequences of their transgression. They experienced the change in their own persons. As a result their eyes were opened in a new way to the significance of moral matters in human life. Conscious of the shamefulness of their new state, they experienced for the first time the fear of God that arises from sinfulness. They had lost the garments of light that manifested their inner purity, and they experienced their nakedness.

Adam and Eve had previously feared God with the awe and respect due him as their Creator and Lord, their Father. Now they feared even to come into his presence. They knew they were unworthy to stand before God's awesome holiness, his absolute moral perfection. Their sinfulness made them unseemly. To use the words of later Scriptures, they had become impure or unclean. Their sinfulness also made them afraid of what God would do with them.

God then summoned Adam and Eve and the serpent. He sat before them as judge, judge because he was ruler of the universe, but also judge because he was their Father. God began, as a good judge should, by questioning Adam and then Eve, probably giving them a chance to accept responsibility for their actions and to repent. There is, however, no indication of repentance in their responses, only a desire to avoid the unfortunate consequences of their actions.

The rest of Scripture tells us that repentance is a way to repair wrongdoing. By how it describes the response of Adam and Eve, Genesis 3 probably indicates that it was not just the first sin that caused the fall of the human race, but also the unwillingness to take advantage of the opportunity for repentance. Had they repented, their sin may not have changed the course of human history the way it did.

God then gave his sentences. They come in the form of "curses". For us the word "curse" usually implies hostility and malice. The biblical words translated for "curse," especially when used of God, do not imply either hostility or malice, but are the actions of the divine judge imposing a penalty that is deserved. The term "curse" is probably too misleading to be a good translation now, but its use cannot always be avoided.

The sentences God pronounced contain a curse on the serpent and a curse on the ground from which the human race was taken. Since humans needed to work the ground to grow food, the curse on the ground was also a curse on the relationship of the human race to nature, the source of the materials human beings need to live. It was consequently a curse on human labor. Although the word "curse" is not used, there was probably a curse on childbirth as well. The natural function that should have been simple delight for the woman became one of pain mixed with joy. God's pronouncements indicate the way in which the sin of the human race negatively affects the natural functions of human life. To sum up the sentences, as a result of sin ordinary human actions lose much of their delightfulness and become difficult and even onerous.

The last evil consequence of their sinful action that directly affected Adam and Eve is described at the end of Genesis 3:

Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever" — therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.
Gen 3:22-24

Adam and Eve were banished or exiled from paradise, and thus deprived of the tree of life and so of their expected immortality. Yet there was more to their exile than this loss. In an age of great mobility and modern communications, modern people have forgotten much of the significance of exile. Exile deprived people of their

home, of their family and friends, and of the way of life they were raised to live. In short, exile deprived them of much of what made their life worth living. As a result, exile often was used as a punishment for wrongdoing.

The exile of Adam and Eve from paradise was itself one of the worst consequences of their sin. They had lost the garden of God: the place of God's presence and human blessedness, the place filled with delight, the place for human life to be lived the way it was supposed to be lived. They had lost the true human home.

Yet there is even more to the loss of paradise than clearly appears in Genesis. Paradise was described as an earthly place and the tree of life as bearing fruit that would prolong earthly life. Teaching in later Scriptures makes clear that God created the human race for an even greater nearness to him than Adam and Eve seemed to have before the fall. With that nearness would come fuller blessedness. Christians have come to use the word "heaven" for the place where that state could be experienced, because "heaven" is the scriptural word for the place of God's dwelling or presence.

There are differing views on the relationship of paradise and heaven. God may have intended the earthly paradise to develop to the point where by living in paradise human beings would be living "in heaven", that is, heaven would come to earth (Rev 21). God may have intended at some point to change the mode of human existence more radically so that paradise would have been "swallowed up" in heaven (2 Cor 5:4). Perhaps these two understandings amount to much the same thing. But however the development is understood, the loss of paradise turns out to be more than just the loss of a good and prolonged earthly life. In Christian terms, it was the loss of heaven as well. It was the loss of the full, blessed life that God had intended for the human race — which they had begun to experience in paradise, which would be completely given to them in heaven, and which they would be able to enjoy eternally.

There is at the same time more to the sentence of death than appears in Genesis. Death is the loss of life. But as Scripture uses "life" to mean a good, blessed human life and not just animate physical existence, so it uses "death" to mean a loss of good, blessed life. It can refer, in other words, to what Christians have called "spiritual death" (Eph 2:1-2), a state in which human beings live without much of the presence of God, without spiritual blessedness, unable to live as they were created to live. Genesis shows us that sin can produce spiritual death even before physical death occurs.

Furthermore, the Scriptures indicate that physical death does not mean that human beings simply go out of existence. Rather, they go down to the place of the dead, Sheol or Hades. Those who have not been rescued from the consequences of the fall live there without the presence of God and the blessedness that comes from being united to him. For those who "die in their sins", the state of death involves unfortunate consequences resulting from their sinful actions.

Many questions surround the afterlife and the place or places of those who do not end up in heaven. For our purposes here, it is enough to note that the punishment of death referred to in Genesis involved more than a simple termination of earthly existence. It involved, first, a change in Adam and Eve so that earthly life itself became a kind of living death. Second, even after the termination of earthly life, death did not produce annihilation but a continued existence deprived of much of what makes human life worthwhile.

The Aftermath

The consequences of sin as described by Genesis were not restricted to the lives of Adam and Eve but extended to their descendants, whose lives are portrayed in Genesis 4–11. The sin of Adam and Eve was disobedience to God, motivated by pride and based on disbelief. It was a sin directly against God himself. This sin against God also seemed to characterize Cain, their first-born son. But he added a further sin — murder, brother killing brother.



In the story of Cain's murder of his brother Abel, we see how the state of sin produces hatred and envy between human beings. The subsequent narrative of the lives of his descendants shows an intensification of evil. By the time of the flood the earth was "filled with violence" (Gen 6:11). Human beings, in short, inflict many of the most serious consequences of sin upon one another. The greatest danger to the human race is not what external forces will do, but what the race will do to itself. The first chapters of Genesis show us that disruption and disorder in the relationship with God leads to disruption and disorder in our relationships with one another.

But the story of the human race is not one of unmitigated evil. Adam and Eve themselves do not seem to have turned completely away from God after the fall. The Book of Wisdom seems to preserve the tradition that Adam repented because of the good influence of God's instruction (Wis 10:1). Most Christian teachers have taken that same view.

Moreover, from Adam and Eve sprang two sons, the murderer Cain and the righteous Abel (Heb 11:4). With them came two ways of life — that of the sons of Cain and that of the sons of Seth, who replaced Abel (Gen 4:25). The sons of Seth called upon the name of the Lord (Gen 4:26), gave birth to Enoch who walked with God (Gen 5:23), and gave birth to righteous Noah (Gen 6:9). Noah in turn gave birth to Abraham. Sin predominates in human life, but there is also goodness and hope, something worth saving.

This goodness is related to another truth presented in Genesis: God did not abandon the human race. Punishment does not necessarily mean total rejection. No sooner had he finished passing sentence, than with fatherly kindness he himself clothed Adam and Eve, because they did not know how to provide for themselves in their new circumstances. He then continued the human race through Adam and Eve by blessing them with children.

God also cared for the descendants of Adam and Eve. He accepted Abel's offering, allowing human beings to maintain a relationship with him. He then replaced the line of Abel after Abel's murder. He even protected Cain from the worst consequences of his sin. When God judged the race as a whole to be worthy of destruction as a result of human evil, he preserved it through Noah, and renewed his original commission. Moreover, he added a special pledge of protection that no matter how evil the human race would become, he would never let it be completely destroyed. The fall, in short, did not totally cut the human race off from God. He was constantly at work to preserve it and lead human beings to the point where they could once again fulfill the purpose for which the human race was created.

Some Christian teachers, primarily in the Western tradition, have called the state of sin that resulted from the first act of disobedience "original sin". "Original" means that the sin comes from the origin of the human race. "Sin" means sinful state rather than sinful actions. Original sin, then, is the sinful state that has resulted from the origins of the human race, the state of human estrangement from God with a related internal condition of sinfulness. This sinful state comes to all human beings through their membership in the race. It is the state of the race as a whole, but

therefore a state that affects individual human beings as well.

Other Christians, primarily from the Eastern Christian tradition, speak of it as “ancestral sin” or “the sin of our forefathers or ancestors”. This perhaps puts more of emphasis on those in the past, rather than on those alive now. However, simply to speak of original sin does not say anything more about the responsibility of those alive now than speaking of ancestral sin.

Many questions have been raised about original sin through the centuries. Some of these center on the guilt that might be due to individuals now alive because of it. Others center on how corrupt or depraved human nature has become as a result of the fall. Because of what could be called the “stronger” views of original sin, many Christians avoid the term because it seems to imply more than they can accept.

Nonetheless, a consensus exists among orthodox Christians that something is wrong with the human race. It is not in the relationship with God it was created for. Apart from the grace of God, the state of the race inevitably leads to sinful actions by most, if not all, who reach the age of being able to perform such actions. Moreover, on their own human beings seem unable to radically change the way they live. For the purposes of this book, such a consensus is enough.

Many people believe the scriptural teaching on original sin can be found in Genesis 3, but this chapter only tells of the first sin. Genesis 4–11 narrates the fact that the first sin was not an isolated event, soon reversed by the repentance of Adam and Eve or by a fresh start with the birth of righteous Abel. Rather, the first sin led to a history that illustrates the truth that the fall of the human race has made human beings prone to sinful actions.

Punishment and Justice

The Penalty of Sin

Most people do not find it difficult to accept the fact of human sinfulness. After all, the spontaneous conviction of the great majority of people is that human beings do evil. This evil can then be understood as sin, once we recognize the existence of a personal God and moral obligations to him. Genesis, however, as well as later Scriptures and Christian teachers, seems to add an important perspective to that commonly accepted fact. It seems to say that the state of sin, along with mortality and the pain and labor of life, is in some way penal. These things originate in the infliction of a penalty or punishment by God. The meaning and truth of such a view need consideration.

God’s penalization of sin could happen in some different ways. The first might be through the bad consequences that follow from sin. These are in large part natural, built into the way human life works. If murder is allowed, conflict will follow, life will become insecure, and sooner or later social life will become less viable for its members. Murder has bad consequences — always for the victim who is deprived of life, usually for the murderer as well, but also for society. Sin does not produce bad consequences only when it provokes external judgment, but sinful actions are themselves intrinsically destructive.

Some would not use the words “penalty” or “punishment” for the bad consequences of sin, but would reserve those words for something deliberately inflicted by an authority who has the responsibility to punish wrongdoing. Parents, however, at times punish their children by allowing them to suffer the consequences of some disobedience. They may give their children an allowance with instructions for its use. If the children choose not to follow them, the parents may let them live through the bad results of their own actions by not helping them when they run out of money. Sometimes parents follow such a course of action simply for instructional reasons. Sometimes, however, they do so specifically as a way of punishing disobedience because they judge their children need some penalization

because of their incorrigibility. What they normally would have rescued their children from, they let them suffer through. Letting others suffer the bad consequences of their actions can at times be a kind of penalization.

When we remember that God created the universe, his approach to sin can be seen as similar to such parental punishment. God set up human life in such a way that unfortunate consequences are connected to the actions he forbade. In this sense, the bad consequences of sin operate as deterrents for future sin. If we understand that God might have relieved us of the consequences of our sins, but did not do so because of our lack of repentance, we could see his allowing the “natural” consequences of our sin to run their course as a penalization.

Genesis, however, seems to present a second way that God punishes sin. He seems to have inflicted pain or difficulty through the “curses” as a special response to the sin of Adam and Eve. At least a narrative is preserved of God “sentencing” Adam and Eve.

Some have held that the curses simply stated the bad consequences that would come as a result of sin. In this view, when God proclaimed the curses to Adam and Eve, he was not by that fact imposing them but merely predicting what would happen to them. This was intended to help them realize that their own actions were responsible for what was befalling them. Sinfulness would simply produce its normal consequences in daily living. Pain and difficulty would come upon the two main areas of human life: family life and work. Some would even understand the sentence of death and banishment from paradise in the same way.

More commonly, however, the “curses” are viewed as an added difficulty that God inflicted upon the human race — above and beyond the automatic bad consequences of sin. In this second view of the “curses”, they are added as a special disciplinary measure designed to lead human beings to repentance. In such an understanding, God intended the added difficulty of human life as a reminder that something is wrong, that the human race is in a different state than when it was originally created. He intended it to lead to a salutary change of attitude, or at least a readiness to receive help when he offered it.

There is yet a further way God punishes sin. Sometimes he punishes sin without any remedial goal in view and simply condemns those who have gone too far and not repented. In a similar way, human beings with governmental authority at times execute or banish other human beings. Execution simply ends human life and is reserved for the greatest of criminals, at least the ones who are deemed hopeless. Banishment eliminates people from a given society and is used in a similar way. Lifelong imprisonment in our society is a type of banishment.

These penalties have a certain inevitability about them. Some people behave, or, given the chance, will behave in a way that is so harmful of others or of the common good that they cannot be left part of the common life without penalizing others. The criminal needs to be penalized in some way, at least to save others and to uphold a needed order in a given human community.

The flood by which God “determined to make an end of all flesh” (Gen 6:13) has been traditionally understood as such a condemnation. It has therefore been taken as a “type” of damnation or condemnation to hell, which Christian teachers have traditionally seen as simply penal, with no remedial role. Hell is the place for those who cannot be part of heaven and have heaven still be a place of blessedness for others. Full blessedness and closeness to God can only happen in a society or community where people freely love God and one another. Those who will not, or cannot be made to do so without having their freedom destroyed, can only be excluded from heaven.

The main punishment for the first sin, however, seems to be neither the evil consequences of what happened nor any added punishments that were specifically inflicted. Rather, it is the loss of the relationship with God that was given to Adam and Eve at their creation, a loss expressed in the banishment from paradise. That in itself is the loss of the

greatest good that the human race can ever have.

A loss is difficult to comprehend for someone who has never experienced what is missing. Those born blind do not seem as unhappy about their handicap as those who have become blind. The Scriptures teach that “seeing God” is itself a great good. Those who have come into such an experiential knowledge of God testify to its being a source of deep joy.

Heaven itself is often described in terms of the beatific vision. “Beatific” means “producing happiness”. The “beatific vision” then, is the vision that makes people happy. The glory of God is such that just to be able to see him is the cause of overflowing happiness. Moreover, many Christian teachers hold that when we see God, we receive something of that glory into ourselves. We share or participate in that glory. Doing so it has a beneficial, joy-producing effect upon us. Even though many human beings do not realize what they are missing, the worst consequence of the fall is the loss of their original closeness to God, which produces beatitude, full human happiness.

The loss of the relationship with God is also serious because it leads to the further loss of a good human life. God is necessary for human beings to fully achieve even a natural happiness. Without a good relationship to him involving submission to his instructions, human beings are unable to live with the kind of moral goodness and character that allows them to achieve a good life and avoid much misfortune. Furthermore, the failure to submit to God and follow his ways cuts the human race off from the wisdom and blessing and help that alone could protect it from demonic influences and guard it from its own weakness.

Sin, in short, is partly as important as it is because human beings need God to live well, and because serious sin cuts us off from God. The state of sin is the absence of that blessed relationship with God that allows us to have true life. It is a tremendous loss to the human race.

Sin, then, has many ways of producing bad consequences, and in origin God is the source of all of them. He has created the universe and governs it in such a way that when human beings sin, they are deprived of much of what makes human life as worthwhile and blessed as God intended it to be. We can, therefore, describe the current state of the human race and many of the circumstances of human life as “penal”.

By describing sin as penal, we are using “penal” in a broad sense. We do not necessarily mean that all the results of human sin are punishments directly inflicted by God as a result of human wrongdoing, although most Christian teachers think that some of them are. We mean that the unfortunate state of the human race is due to the deserved consequences of sin, whether directly inflicted or simply the consequences of human actions, and of the disruption of the relationship with God that those actions produced, consequences which God has not chosen to relieve human beings from. We also are saying that in ensuring that the universe was governed in such a way that wrongdoing produced negative consequences, God has acted as a good father and judge should.

Justice and Hope

If sin is in some way penalized or punished by God, then we are confronted with the question of God’s penal justice, both his penal justice as manifested in the way he handled the first sin and the way he currently relates to the fallen human race. “Justice” traditionally has been defined in Western thought as “giving others their due”. To be just according to such an understanding, actions that deprive others of their due need to have a good reason, a justifiable reason, otherwise they should not be done.

Penalties are a main category of actions that have to be evaluated in terms of their justice since they involve

depriving people of what normally would be considered as “due” to them. People in prison no longer have that freedom of action which is normally considered “their due” or, to put it in another way, their ordinary right. Penal justice is the jus-tice that governs such matters. A just ruler should not inflict punishments without good reason. We are therefore concerned with whether God’s actions of penalizing human beings can be justified in any way that human beings can make sense of.

But is God a just ruler? Does he even have to be just? Some thinkers, including some Christian theologians, have held that God is above justice. As a Creator, God is free to act as he will, so that what he does cannot be unjust. Most Christian theologians, however, have held that if God is to be considered morally good at all and so distinguishable from Satan, he must act in a way that we can somehow recognize as justice — even if it does not correspond exactly to what we would call justice in an earthly ruler. Since the Scriptures call God “just” with the same word that they use for good earthly rulers, he must at least intend to be just in something of the same way.

Then was God just in allowing the descendants of Adam and Eve to suffer the way they did as a result of the sins of their parents? The first chapters of Genesis give us a preliminary answer to this question.

First, we are dealing with creation. God could create the human race the way he wished. Whatever benefits he gave human beings were more than they deserved. That the descendants of Adam ended up with less than they might have had if Adam had responded differently is not a reflection on God. This is perhaps the most fundamental answer — God has never been obligated to give human beings all that he gave them at their creation.

Second, Genesis seems to indicate that from God’s point of view, human beings can at any time return to a better state by turning away from sin and toward God. Sin is still the problem, not God. Sin leads to bad consequences. Sin deserves penalization. The human race does not always live in perfect evil, and as a result, does not always live in perfect misery either. Human history is a play of light and shadow, and the freer from sin human beings live, the better their lives become. The penalties that come from sin are in an important way the responsibility of those who sin.

These observations are true. They allow us to see that God’s actions are not unjust in the most basic sense of “unjust”. If the human race either corporately or individually fails to fulfill God’s conditions, human beings have no claim on the blessings he bestowed at creation. They are fortunate that he has left them with as much as he has. Yet to focus on the “minimum requirements of justice” is not to see the whole picture. It does not allow us to understand God’s solution to the predicament of the human race.

Once we see the human predicament in the light of God’s full revelation we get a different perspective. When we know about the existence of a life of eternal gladness in the presence of God (“heaven”) and of eternal loss in separation from God (“hell”), the predicament looks more serious. The truth about the human condition adds to that assessment. When we see the weakness of the human race, its proneness to sin, and its consequent inability to please God in a way that could deserve the gift of heaven, the predicament looks still more serious.

If we look at the predicament of the human race just within the framework of this life, improvement does not so clearly seem beyond human effort, bad as the record may have been to date. Once, however, we see the glory of what God intended for his sons and daughters, the loss seems irreparable. God may not be unjust in how he has conducted himself towards the human race, but nonetheless there seems to be no hope that the race will ever recover its lost blessing.



Genesis provides a basis for hope in a seemingly obscure but significant passage in the curse on the serpent:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. Gen 3:15

Some Christian writers, based on the New Testament (Rom 16:19-20), have seen this as the first proclamation of the gospel. If so, it is a prophetic one, and like most prophecy it is somewhat obscure before its fulfillment.

The words of this passage promise hostility between the serpent (Satan) and the woman, here representing the human race. There will be lasting conflict, but the conflict will involve the human race having the upper hand. The picture behind the prophecy is of a barefoot man being bitten as he crushes and destroys a snake. A human being will be victorious, although he will only be victorious with suffering.

According to many Christian teachers, that image has been fulfilled in the sufferings and death of Christ. The prophecy means that the enemy of the human race, the one who caused its downfall, will himself be defeated by a future representative of the human race. That representative in the traditional Christian understanding is Christ, who will be wounded in the process (have his heel “bruised”). He will not, however, be destroyed and will prove victorious in crushing Satan.

The first “curse”, the one on the serpent, then, is actually a promise of blessing for human beings. God’s words of punishment begin with a promise of deliverance for his sons and daughters. God’s full “justice”, his merciful willingness to help human beings even when they do not deserve it, and his just approach to rescuing them from the penalization they do deserve, can therefore only be understood in the light of his future plan.

Rescuing A Lost Race

There is a fairy tale about a baby found in the woods and raised by simple peasants. One day a knight comes to the family’s hut and sees the child. He looks and acts like a peasant child, uneducated, unable to speak his native

language in a proper way, with simple, somewhat rude manners. But when the knight looks at him, he is struck by the child's appearance. Despite his peasant-like and unpromising manner and behavior, the child looks like the king. The knight has discovered the lost son of the king who years before had been kidnapped by an enemy and left in the forest to die.

The human race is much like that child. As we consider human affairs, we see much evil — wars, murders, robberies, violence, and cruelty. We see senseless brutalities — sadism, torture, genocide. We even see human beings destroying themselves, giving themselves over to enslaving addictions, or letting themselves deteriorate to satiate some lust. We see noble empires fall into ruin; great endeavors wither. Futility, insecurity, and failure seem the constant accompaniment of human life.

Yet we also see a race that is capable of great kindness, heroic deeds, high successes, and vast accomplishments. We see individuals whose character we can admire, whose wisdom we can learn from. Even more, we see a race that seems capable of recognizing that much that it does is evil, that knows a great deal about how to distinguish good from evil, and that seems to want a society of peace and justice better than any it has so far produced.

We, in short, see a race that was made in the image of the King — the Lord of the universe, who made all things good — but a race that has fallen into great evil. The state of the human race as the Scriptures describe it does not have to be proven. It is all around us to see.

How can the son of the king be restored to his Father and his royal state? How can the image of the great King be recreated so that the likeness is recognizable in every respect? How can the human race become what most of us intuitively think it should be?

The answer of a Christian reflection on Genesis is that sin has to be taken away, removed from human life. Not only do human beings have to cease doing the things that cause evil and further ruin, the things that deserve penalization, but also the sinful state of the human race that causes those actions has to be changed. The disease that leads to death has to be healed. Sinfulness has to be eradicated; true health, true life, has to be given. Human beings need a Redeemer, someone who can rescue them from the misfortune into which they have fallen and restore them to true life.

The rest of this book will concern that Redeemer, Jesus Christ, and what he did to rescue human beings from the predicament in which they found themselves.

[Steve Clark](#) is a founder and former president of the [Sword of the Spirit](#), a noted author of numerous books and articles, and a frequent speaker. This article is excerpted from chapter 1 of Steve Clark's Book, [Redeemer: Understanding the Meaning of the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ](#), copyright © 1992, 2014. Used with permission.

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A Mirror to See Inside Ourselves

by Gregory the Great (540-604 AD)

Holy Scripture is presented to the mind's eye like a mirror in which the appearance of our inner being can be seen.

In this mirror we can see both the ugliness and the beauty of our soul. We can tell what progress we are making or whether we are making any progress at all.

Holy Scripture recounts the good deeds of the saints and encourages the hearts of the weak to imitate them. In recording the prowess of the saints, Scripture also underlines our weakness in the face of the onslaught of the vices. But its words ensure that the more the soul sees of the triumphs of so many heroes of the faith, the less it is alarmed in the midst of its own battle.

Sometimes, however, Holy Scripture does not only record the victories of the saints but also mentions their defeats, so that we may see from their failures what we ought to be afraid of, besides learning from their triumphs what we ought to aim at. For example, Job is described in the Bible as being exalted by temptation, whereas David is represented as humiliated by it.

By this means, our hopes may be nourished by the valor of people in the past, while because of their weakness we may gird on the protection of humility.

The victories of the saints give our spirits wings through the joy they cause; their failures give us pause through fear.

From Scripture the soul of the reader learns the confidence of hope and the humility of fear. Thanks to the weight of the fear, it does not have the temerity to be proud; but this fear does not cast it into utter despair, because the soul is fortified in the strength of hope by the examples of valor.

Gregory the Great (540-604 AD), *Commentary on the Book of Job*, 2, 1 (SC32, p.180)

[translation by Thomas Spidlik, [*Drinking from the Hidden Fountain: A Patristic Breviary*](#), Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan - Spencer, Massachusetts, 1994]



Gregory the Great (540-604 A.D.) was born in Rome into a wealthy noble Roman family with close connections to the church. On his father's death, he converted his family villa into a monastery dedicated to the apostle Saint Andrew. He was ordained a priest, and became one of the pope's seven deacons. He also served six years in the East as papal representative in Constantinople. He was recalled to become abbot, and at the age of 50 was elected pope by the clergy and people of Rome.

Gregory was content to be a monk, but he willingly served the Church in other ways when asked. He sacrificed his own preferences in many ways, especially when he was called to be Bishop of Rome. Once he was called to public service, Gregory gave his considerable energies completely to this work. He was the first of the popes to come from a monastic background.

He was direct and firm. He removed unworthy priests from office, forbade taking money for many services, emptied the papal treasury to ransom prisoners of the Lombards and to care for persecuted Jews and the victims of plague and famine. He was very concerned about the conversion of England, sending 40 monks from his own monastery. Gregory lived in a time of perpetual strife with invading Lombards and difficult relations with the East. When Rome itself was under attack, he interviewed the Lombard king.

His book, *Pastoral Care*, on the duties and qualities of a bishop, was read for centuries after

his death. He described bishops mainly as physicians whose main duties were preaching and the enforcement of discipline. In his own down-to-earth preaching, Gregory was skilled at applying the daily gospel to the needs of his listeners. Called "the Great," Gregory has been given a place with Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome, as one of the four key doctors of the Western Church. He is also known as St. Gregory the Dialogist in Eastern Orthodoxy because of his *Dialogues*.

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The Mountain of Your Sins Will Never be Too High

by Cyril of Jerusalem (349-386 AD)

Anyone who is a slave to sin should prepare himself for true regeneration by means of faith. He must shake the yoke of sin off his back and enter the joyful service of the Lord. He will be thought worthy to inherit the kingdom.

Don't hesitate to declare yourselves sinners. Thereby you will put your old humanity that was corrupt because it followed the bait of error. And you will put on the new humanity, the humanity newly clad in intimacy with its Creator.

The regeneration of which I am speaking is not the rebirth of the body, but the second birth of the soul. Bodies are procreated by the father and mother, but souls are recreated by means of faith, since the Spirit blows where it will [John 3:8].

God is kind and he is kind to an immeasurable extent.

Don't say: "I have been dishonest, an adulterer, I have committed grave offences innumerable times. Will he forgive them? Will he deign to forget them?" Listen rather to the Psalmist: "How great is your love, O Lord" [cf. Psalm 31:9].

Your sins piled one above the other do not overtop the greatness of God's love. Your wounds are not too great for the skill of the Doctor.

There is only one course of treatment for you to follow: rely on him in faith. Explain frankly what is wrong to the Doctor and say with the Psalmist: "I acknowledge my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity" [Psalm 32:5]. Then you will be able to go on with the Psalmist to say: "Then did you forgive the guilt of my sin."

Catecheses, 1,2ff. (PG33, 372)



Cyril was born in Jerusalem around 315 AD. He was ordained deacon, then presbyter, and then bishop of Jerusalem around 349. During a time of great division in the church, between the Council of Nicea in 325 and the Council of Constantinople in 381, Cyril labored to reconcile the disputes between church leaders. He was exiled from his bishopric three times, for a total of sixteen years, for his bold proclamation of faith in Christ's full divinity during a time when many bishops and emperors favored various forms of the Arian heresy. In 381 he attended the Council of Constantinople and voted in favor of the formula which completed the Creed often known as the Nicene Creed. He died around 386.

Cyril is author of the *Catecheses*, or *Catechetical Lectures on the Christian Faith* – a series of eighteen lectures delivered during Lent to those about to be baptized at Easter, and then a series of five lectures on the sacraments which were delivered after Easter to the newly baptized.

[Translation by Paul Drake. For more readings see *Drinking from the Hidden Fountain: A Patristic Breviary*, by Thomas Spidlik, Cistercian Publications, 1994.]

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Why Does God Allow Temptation?

by Maximus the Confessor (580-662 AD)

One can distinguish five reasons why God allows devils to attack us:

First, so that from attack and counter-attack we may become practised in discerning good from evil.

Second, so that our virtue may be maintained in the heat of the struggle and so be confirmed in an impregnable position.

Third, so that as we advance in virtue we may avoid presumption and learn humility.

Fourth, to inspire in us an unreserved hatred for evil through the experience we thus have of it.

Fifth, and above all, that we may attain inner freedom and remain convinced both of our own weakness and of the strength of him who has come to our aid.

- *Centuries on Charity*, 2, 67 (SC9,p114.)

Right Use not Misuse

It is important to understand the right use of external objects and pictures of them in our imagination.

The reasonable use of them produces for its fruit the virtues of chastity, charity, and right knowledge.

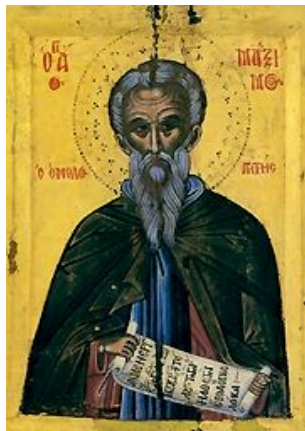
The unreasonable use results in debauchery, hatred, and ignorance.

It is through the measure in which we misuse the powers of the soul, namely its desire, emotion, reason, that the vices install themselves: ignorance and folly in the reasoning faculty, hatred and debauchery in the desires and emotions. The right use, on the contrary, produces right knowledge and prudence, charity, and chastity.

Nothing that God has created is in itself bad. Food is not bad, gluttony is. The procreation of children is not bad, lecher is. Wealth is not bad, avarice is. Glory is not bad, vainglory is.

So you see nothing is bad in itself, only the misuse of it, which is the soul's negligence in cultivating its true nature.

- *Centuries on Charity*, 3, 1 (SC9,p123.)



Maximus the Confessor (580-662 AD), also known as Maximus the Theologian and Maximus of Constantinople, was a Christian monk, theologian, and scholar. He was born in the region of Constantinople and was well educated. In his early life, Maximus was a civil servant, and an aide to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius. He gave up this life in the political sphere to enter into the monastic life. Around 614, he became a monk (later abbot) at the monastery of Chrysopolis. During the Persian invasion of the Empire (614), he fled to Africa. He was exiled twice, tortured in 662 and died shortly after. His title of Confessor means that he suffered for the Christian faith, but was not directly martyred.

[Translation by Paul Drake. For more readings see *Drinking from the Hidden Fountain: A Patristic Breviary*, by Thomas Spidlik, Cistercian Publications, 1994.]

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Dead to Sin

from a sermon by John Chrysostom (349-407 AD)

Death through sin

“Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned” (Romans 5:12).

As the best physicians always take great pains to discover the source of diseases, and go to the very fountain of the mischief, so does the blessed Paul also. Hence after having said that we were justified, and having shown it from the Patriarch, and from the Spirit, and from the dying of Christ (for He would not have died unless He intended to justify), he next confirms from other sources also what he had at such length demonstrated. And he confirms his proposition from things opposite, that is, from death and sin. How, and in what way? He enquires whence death came in, and how it prevailed. How then did death come in and prevail? Through the sin of one. But what means, for that all have sinned? This; he having once fallen, even they that had not eaten of the tree did from him, all of them, become mortal...



Baptized into his death

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4).

What does being baptized into his death mean? It has to do with our dying as he did. We do this by our baptism, for baptism is the cross. What the cross is to Christ, baptism is to us. Christ died in the flesh; we have died to sin. Both are deaths, both are real.

But if it is real, what is our part, what must we contribute? Paul goes on to say, “As Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). Here Paul tells of the importance of the resurrection.

Do you believe that Christ was raised from the dead? Believe the same of yourself. Just as his death is yours, so also is his resurrection; if you have shared in the one, you shall share in the other. As of now the sin is done away with.

Paul sets before us a demand: to bring about a newness of life by a changing of habits. For when the fornicator becomes chaste, when the covetous person become merciful, when the harsh become subdued, a resurrection has taken place, a prelude to the final resurrection which is to come.

How is it a resurrection? It is a resurrection because sin has been mortified, and righteousness has risen in its place; the old life has passed away, and new, angelic life is now being lived.

The old age of sin

But tears come into my eyes when I think of how much Paul is asking of us and how little we have changed after our baptism, yielding ourselves to sin, going back to the oldness we had before, returning to Egypt, and remembering the onions after the manna. We undergo a change for only ten or

twenty days after our baptism, but then take up former things again.

But we must see that it is not for a few days that we are required to change, but rather, for a whole lifetime. The youth of grace must not lead to the old age of sin. The love of money, the slavery to wrong desire, or any sin whatsoever, makes us grow old in soul and body. Our souls become rheumatic, distorted, decayed, and tottering with many sins.

Such, then, are the souls of sinners. Not so those of the righteous, for they are youthful and strong, always in the prime of life, ready for any fight. Not so for the sinners, for they are subject to the fall at the least resistance. The sinful lose their ability to see, to hear, and to speak, for they spew forth words that are foul.

Suddenly young

Like the prodigal son, the sinful end up in the mire of the pig's slop, reduced to the greatest wretchedness, and are in a worse state than any disordered person. But when the prodigal was willing, he became suddenly young by his decision. As soon as he said, "I will return to my Father," this one word conveyed to him all the blessings; or rather, not the word alone, but the deed which he added to the word. He did not say, "I will return," and then stay where he was.

Thus, let us also do this, no matter how far we have gotten carried away in our journey. Let us go back to our Father's house, not lingering over the length of the journey. For we shall find, if we be willing, that the way back again is very easy and very speedy. Only let us leave this strange land of sin where we have been drawn away from the Father. For our Father has a natural yearning toward us and will honor us if we are changed. He finds great pleasure in receiving back his children.



The easier it will be

And how am I to go back again? Start back by avoiding vice, going no farther into it, and you have come home. When a person who is sick does not get any worse it is a sign that he is getting better, and

so is the case with vice. Go no further and your deeds of wickedness will have an end.

If you do so for two days, you will keep off on the third more easily; and after three days you will add then, then twenty, then a hundred, then your whole life. For the further you journey back the easier it will be to see how you should be, and the more you will begin to see of your great rewards.

So it was with the prodigal son who, when he returned, was greeted with flutes and harps and dancing and feasts. His father who might have chided him for his ill-timed extravagance did nothing of the sort. He did not even mention it, but rather, looked at him as without stain, throwing himself upon him and kissing him.

God's exceeding desire

Let us, then, as we have such examples before us, be of good cheer and keep from despair. For God is not so well pleased with being our Master as he is with being our Father; he is not so pleased with our being his slaves as he is with our being his children. This is what God truly wants. This is why he did all that he has done, not sparing his only begotten Son, that we, as adopted sons and daughters, might love him as a Father.

God's exceeding desire to be loved comes from loving exceedingly. This is why Jesus said, "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me." He even calls us to esteem that which is most precious to us—our soul—as second to the love of God, for our Father wishes to be loved by us entirely.

When we do not love a person we do not wish to be with them, no matter how great or noble that person may be. But when we love someone, we want to be with them, and we view their love for us with great honor even if they are not a person of great rank. For this reason—and not because of our great rank—God values our love. So much, in fact, that he suffered greatly on our behalf.

What is there to fear?

Let us, then, incur dangers for him, running as if for the greatest of crowns. Let us have no fear of poverty or disease, nor hardship or even death itself. For what is there to fear? Losing all of your money? If you bear it nobly, it will be as great a reward to you as if you gave it all to the poor—as long as you freely lose it because you know you have a greater reward in heaven.

What else is there to fear? Having people revile and persecute you? If so, those people have weaved a great crown for you if you bear it meekly. Rejoice and be glad, Jesus said, when people speak evil against you falsely, for great is your reward in heaven. And even if they speak the truth against us, is it our advantage if we bear it humbly, as the Pharisee spoke rightly about the publican, but only the publican went home justified because he bore it in humility.

Why do we seek profit? What did Judas profit for being with Christ? Or what profit was the law to the Jews? Or paradise to Adam? Or the promised land to the Israelites? We should keep our mind fixed on one point only: how may we do what is best with the resources we have been given.



A serpent nestling in our bed

If we do this, not even the devil himself will get the better of us. We must remember that we deal with a crafty enemy. If we were suddenly aware of a serpent nestling in our bed, we would go to great lengths to kill it. But when the devil nestles in our souls, we tell ourselves we are in no danger, and thus we lie at ease. Why? Because we do not see him and his intent with our mortal eyes.

This is why we must rouse ourselves and be more sober. Fighting an enemy we can see makes it easy to be on guard, but one that cannot be seen we will not easily escape. Also, know that the devil has no desire for open combat (for he would surely be defeated), but rather, under the appearance of friendship, intends to insinuate the venom of his malice.

For example, he used Job's wife under guise of love for her husband; Jephtha, too, he persuaded under the pretext of religion to slay his daughter, offering a sacrifice the law forbade. It was the same with Adam, for he put on the air of being concerned for his well-being, saying that his eyes "shall be opened" by eating from the tree.

Be on your guard, and arm yourself with weapons of the Spirit. Become acquainted with the devil's plans that you may keep from getting caught in his traps, and instead, expose him. Paul got the better of him because he was "not ignorant of his devices." Learn and avoid the devil's stratagems, so that after obtaining victory over him, we may, whether in this present life or in that which is to come, be proclaimed conquerors and obtain those unalloyed blessings.

excerpt from *Homily 10 on Romans*

[Translated by J. Walker, J. Sheppard and H. Browne, and revised by George B. Stevens. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 11*. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889.)]



John Chrysostom (c. 349-407) was an important early church father. He was born of noble parents in Antioch in 349. John acquired the skills for a career in rhetoric, as well as a love of the Greek language and literature. As he grew older he became more deeply committed to Christianity and went on to study theology. John became a hermit around 375. He was ordained a deacon in 381, and then ordained as a presbyter (priest) in 386 by Bishop Flavian I of Antioch.

Over the course of twelve years, he gained popularity because of the eloquence of his public speaking, especially his insightful expositions of Bible passages and moral teaching. Known as "the greatest preacher in the early church", John's sermons have been one of his greatest lasting legacies. The most valuable of his works from this period are his Homilies on various books of the Bible. He emphasised charitable giving and was concerned with the spiritual and temporal needs of the poor. He also spoke out against abuse of wealth and personal property. He founded a series of hospitals in Constantinople to care for the poor.

In 398, John was requested, against his will, to take the position of Archbishop of Constantinople. John was fearless when denouncing offences in high places. He was banished twice by the secular authorities. After his death, which occurred in 407) he was named Chrysostom, which comes from the Greek word which means, "golden-mouthed."

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Person to Person: A practical approach to effective evangelism



Building Bridges - Person to Person Evangelism

by Jim Berlucchi

One of the best ways of being open about our faith is to bring others into contact with fellow Christians. I call that bridge building. As individuals we lack all the human and spiritual resources needed to lead and help others into a full life in Christ. Only the body of Christ is sufficient for that task. In this chapter our focus is on how to put people in contact with a Christian environment.

We sometimes underestimate the importance of social groups and the potency of their influence on belief and behavior. Some psychologists subscribe to a theory spearheaded by the renowned psychologist, B.F. Skinner, that environmental factors exclusively shape human action. While this view wrongly excludes free will, it rightfully perceives that we are shaped to a great extent by our environment. In fact, our values, beliefs, clothing styles, and patterns of speech are powerfully influenced by the human circles in which we travel.

It is important, then, to use the life of the body of Christ to help win men and women more fully into the kingdom. This truth has foundational implications for the work of evangelism. We see its preeminence in the early church.

And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple

together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:43-47)

It is no accident that thousands were affected by a group of believers and were eventually added to their number. The Acts of the Apostles contains frequent examples of the influence of a body of disciples. Yet, because this kind of full body life is uncommon among modern Christians, it is often overlooked in the process of personal evangelism. Where it's working right, however, it provides a key link in helping others respond to Christ.

In fact, of the easiest ways to be open about our Christianity is to simply invite others into our Christian circles. For example, a group in my town sponsors a weekly Christian professional men's breakfast. About one hundred men attend each week. The event is designed to attract businessmen to the Lord and to support them in their Christian walk. Regular attendees invite non-Christians as well as Christian friends. Through this simple breakfast outreach, many businessmen have come into a deeper relationship with Christ. In this case, a simple invitation is the key step needed for personal evangelism. The individual Christian doesn't have the total burden of converting and disciplining another, but can merely introduce him to a compelling Christian environment.

There are many examples of such spiritual bridge-building. It is well for us to take stock of the Christian environments we can use to help others in their Christian life. Perhaps our own home provides a powerful Christian witness. In his book *Disciples Are Made – Not Born*, Walter A. Henrichsen recommends that Christians invite potential or recent converts to their homes for meals and participation in family life. He recounts the impact of this involvement in his own life: "Bob W. Wheeler, a carpenter by trade, was the person who led me to Christ many years ago. One of the most significant things he did was to involve me in his family life. His home was my home. I always felt welcome. I cannot recall how many times I ate at his table, but I know I virtually ate him out of house and home!"

We can invite others to share the warmth and fellowship of our church, prayer groups, or Bible studies. Not only will they receive spiritual nourishment, but they will also experience the power and vitality of Christian love. It was the firsthand experience of a large, joyous, affectionate group of Christians that motivated my search for spiritual renewal. I had never seen so much love expressed among so many different types of people. I concluded that they were either odd ducks or that they really had found some secret. I went on to search for and discover that secret.

If you give a little thought to bridge building, you will discover many such bridges. You might invite someone to lunch with your Christian friends, to a regular soccer game, to parties, barbecues, or concerts. The key is to provide a means of contact with other Christians. Such environments work best when you have already established natural relationships with other Christians yourself.

Natural activities and relationships are often the very best opportunities for extending invitations to outsiders. One group which I know of formed a softball team to compete in the city league. Most of the men were members of the same Christian group. They purposefully left open a few spots for some of their non-Christian friends. The Christian men had deep and affectionate relationships. Their love for one another was obviously expressed by their enthusiasm and mutual encouragement. One could quickly observe the absence of profanity and negativity among them. Moreover, they were good ball players.

The men played weekly, and most of their families were present at the games. Afterward they would gather at

someone's house for an outdoor barbecue. The few non-Christian men along with their families participated regularly and were given specific and warm attention by the Christian players, who were, in fact, praying for them and discussing among themselves how best to evangelize them.

The game and barbecues were not a pretext for speaking constantly about Christianity. Only infrequent remarks were made about spiritual matters. Yet the process strongly affected two of the men, who later joined a Bible study hosted by two of the Christian families. Eventually, these men became Christians. Later, the men cited the ball games and barbecues as the most influential ingredient in their own conversion. They were quick to perceive the joy and depth of their Christian teammates and were motivated by that observation as well as by the warm initiative of the Christian men. Vital kingdom relationships were instrumental in drawing these men into that same kingdom. It was not the work of a single man, but the work of a group of men. It was not the witness of a single life, but the corporate witness of the body of Christ. What a single worker could not do was done by men living and working together – giving witness to the new life which comes from Christ.

I have personally observed this principle of bridge-building many times in the past several years. I have found that one of the easiest and most natural ways of being open about my Christian life. None of us, including myself, is able to meet every need. I have found that the body of Christ is God's answer to the needs of many individuals. This resource is a key ingredient in personal evangelism.

If we have formed committed relationships with other Christians, it will be easy for us to introduce those we are evangelizing to key individuals and to invite them to various Christian activities. For instance, if you are evangelizing a physician, it might help to introduce him to a Christian physician you know. Whenever you recognize your own limitations in helping a particular person, try to connect them to someone uniquely able to help them. I remember a couple of instances in which I was trying to evangelize someone much older than myself. I found that it helped to arrange dinner and golf for my guest and myself with some older Christians.

What about evangelizing people of the opposite sex? This kind of evangelism can pose some of its own potential hazards. It can help to build bridges with someone of the same sex as the person you are evangelizing. With the help of other brothers and sisters, you can truly be "all things for all men" (and women).

If we want to bring others into contact with a larger Christian environment, it is important that we develop friendships with those we are trying to reach. No evangelist better demonstrated this principle than Jesus himself. "He ordained twelve, that they should be with Him, and that He might send them forth to preach" (Mk 3:14). He ordained them not just for service, but to be with him. Jesus ate, slept, traveled, and spent a great deal of personal time with his disciples. If our evangelistic efforts are to bear fruit, we must be committed to make friends and spend time with those we are trying to bring to Christ. Personal relationships in redeemed environments are the bread and butter of basic evangelism. Our aim is not to sell a product or to ensnare pagan victims, but to extend the "fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life" (2 Corinthians 2:14-16). What is this fragrance if not the real affection and love that Christ himself has for men?

If we maintain friendships with people, we can continue to invite them into our circles, be available to offer advice, and recommend helpful books and tapes to them. Diligent follow-up insures our sensitivity to the working of the Holy Spirit. Our own faithful persistence offers a kind of spiritual protection from the strategic wiles of the devil. I make it a regular practice to stay in touch with people enough so that further invitations are not stilted and so that I don't offer advice in an ill-informed way.

Invitation, friendship, and follow-up when operating within the context of a larger Christian environment are normally indispensable in leading men and women into a full Christian life. An honest analysis of our relationships might motivate us to strengthen our own ties to a Christian environment. In personal evangelism, we must recognize that our evangelistic success depends critically on access to the body of Christ and to the head, Jesus.

[This article is adapted from the book, *Person to Person: How to be effective in evangelism*, © 1984 by Jim Berlucchi, and published by Servants Books, Ann Arbor.]

[See related article on Personal Evangelism](#)

- > [Part 1: True "No Limit" Message](#)
- > [Part 2: Everyday Evangelism](#)
- > [Part 3: Be Open - Be Natural](#)



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Hospitality

Do the doors of our heart say “*welcome*” or “*go away*”?

by Dave Quintana

Christian hospitality

I believe that Christian hospitality is one of the most under-utilized and keenly needed gifts in the Body of Christ. Hospitality is having room for people in your heart and in your home. It is saying, “I have room for you. You are welcome here. This is a safe and good place for you.” It requires us to be not preoccupied with our own concerns, it demands us to have a “vacancy” sign on the doorposts of our hearts and a welcome mat by every door and every phone. I’m reminded of the mat a dear brother of mine has by his office. It’s of the nice “welcome”, “bienvenidos”, “my house is your house”, flowers and doves variety ... except that it says, “GO AWAY!!” I’m afraid that’s what people would often read between the lines if they studied my face or read my mind! Christian hospitality is a gift that needs cultivating. It is our Christian responsibility, and can have a powerful spiritual impact in a love-famished world.

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

- Hebrews 13:1-2ESV translation

Poverty is not a poor host

Now for some really good news for all of us—you don’t have to be super wealthy or have it all together to be hospitable. Fortunately for people like you and me, even poverty is a good host. Let me say that again—our poverty is a good host. Our poverty can be a source of riches for others, our wounds can be a source of healing

for others, our struggles can be a source of freedom for others, but only if we are willing to allow the Lord to use them, if we are willing to allow the Lord to transform them. I would rather serve people out of my strengths, out of the victories and triumphs in my life, but that is often not how the Lord chooses to work. At the end of the day, each of us is at best a wounded healer.

And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

- Mark 12:41-44 ESV translation

Freely we receive, generously we give

The Corinthians are a great example for us. They did not have much, in fact they had very little, but they gave generously from what they had. They knew what Thérèse of Lisieux knew, that only those that realize that they have received much can give much. We are called to be generous, with God and with others. We can be generous in the way we love and serve each other. We can learn to welcome others and listen to them as a form of spiritual hospitality. We need to remember that those who sow generously will reap abundantly.

And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.

- Philippians 4:15-17 ESV translation

Our need for hospitality

For those of us who have been a part of a church or Christian group for a long time it is easy to forget what it was like when we first arrived. "Do I fit in here? Am I welcome here? Am I needed here? Is there a contribution I can make here?" We want to make a difference. We want to be joined with others where we can both give and receive, where we are not a burden on others, where we are not perceived as "high maintenance". We want to know that our presence makes a difference for people, that somehow people's lives are better because we are a part of them. One of the things that makes elderly people want to wake up in the morning is knowing that someone is waiting for them. One of the things that helps us approach death with faith and confidence is that someone is waiting to see us on the other side. Let us host each other well, in small things and in significant things, remembering that we are all but passing guests.

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

- Philemon 4-7 ESV translation

The benefits of hospitality

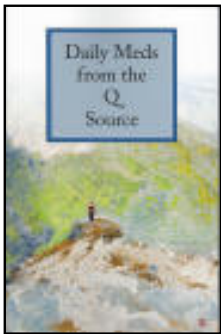
And let's not forget that there is much to be gained in hosting well. Of course, we all know Bible stories of

welcoming strangers and finding that you are hosting angels unaware or even holding conversation with Jesus himself. My dear Benedictine brothers' welcome packet informs guests that their rule commits them "to refresh you and send you back in peace". Let's not forget what a blessing guests can bring us. Can we not learn to receive each person the Lord brings to us as a gift of God? Each of them a divine messenger in some way? Each of them a divine appointment in some way? Each of them a divine blessing in some way? After all, it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

- 1 Peter 4:9 ESV translation

Dave Quintana is an elder of the [Servants of the Word](#), a missionary brotherhood of men living single for the Lord. He is also a regional coordinator for the [Sword of the Spirit](#) in Europe and the Middle East. He currently lives in Belfast, Northern Ireland.



Daily Meds from the Q Source
by Dave Quintana, published by Tabor House, 2012

Dave Quintana's daily meditations and Bible readings to stir our minds and kindle our hearts in 2013. He explores themes important to all who search to be wise men and women in the Lord, and provides a wealth of personal experience from living and ministering in Central America, Asia, Europe, and the United States. Expect to be challenged. Expect to be inspired. Expect to meet the living and loving God. .

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Koinonia students, staff, and friends celebrate a Thanksgiving evening at the Brothers house in London

Living a Life of Unity in London

by Andy Pettman

It's a Thursday night late in November at the Servants of the Word brothers' house in West London. The ground floor is full – forty university students have moved in – they have come for a “cultural experience.” In the corner there's a conversation in Arabic, in another Spanish banter, and all around the room heavily accented English. One woman, clearly from France, says “I never knew zat you could make a dezzert out of pumkeens!”

The head chef for the day, Lebanese Joe, explains the thanksgiving traditions he learnt from two years across the water [in the USA]. And the big question still hangs in the air: “Who are we thanking at this thanksgiving?” Maybe there is a God out there who is waiting to be thanked...maybe he is waiting for you to turn to him?

31 Lynton Road, the Servants of the Word brothers' house in London, has been a gift from the Lord. I remember the day in 1992 when I walked in for the first time. I instantly knew that this was the right house for us. It was close to the main cluster of Antioch member houses. It had the right sort of mixture of rooms that we could imagine using as offices, bedrooms, a lounge and prayer space...and yes of course, ground floor rooms perfect for evangelistic parties.



This year there are eleven of us living in the house coming from nine countries: two Americans (Jamie and Don), two Lebanese (Joe and Peter), one Fijian (Eroni), one Indian (Ralph), one Canadian (John), one Filipino (Jake) on sabbatical with us for five months, and three British, but from three countries (Welsh Richard, Scottish Pete, and English Andy)!

It's 7pm on a Friday night in late November. Frying of meat and spices has been going on all afternoon, and now Armenian Lamb is being carried through the house to a car waiting to whisk it down to the annual pastors' dinner. 7:30pm and Acton Green Church is buzzing. Tables have been laid for 50; guests start arriving; drinks are poured; "hello Father Brian"... "great to see you Rev John"... "Jenny how lovely to see you", leaders, pastors, and spouses from eleven different churches in Acton. The Baptist pastor's wife says "I love this event – it kicks off Christmas for me every year"; Fr Kieran cracks a joke; there is a slapping of backs, bear hugs and handshakes that suggest... peace. Andy one of the brothers, and the main leader of Antioch, kicks off with a welcome: "We want this evening to be a place where we as leaders experience unity in Christ, and a time when we in Antioch can say thank you for the work you do for us." Its 10:30pm; chat keeps on, but time marches; coats are found; again and again: "thank you for making this night happen".

The unity of Christians is huge for us brothers in London, since we are part of many different churches ourselves: Methodist, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Maronite Catholic, and Greek Catholic! Helping to build unity is part of our DNA.



Its 6pm on the first Saturday in December. Ten boys age 13-17 are joining the brothers for the celebration of the Lord's Day. Worship begins; most raise their hands and praise God; all sing. Tables are laid; food served; football scores exchanged; jokes abound. Everyone is in the kitchen singing over dishes. Laughter flows as we strive for victory in the "hat game".

Our brothers serve in many different ways, but youth and student work is where we put our biggest missionary effort. Some of our brothers are also involved in leading and developing our work with the network of communities of which we are part, the Sword of the Spirit, in pastoral work, administration, development, literature and finances. Others have been accountants or business consultants, and today one of our brothers is an artist and coach.

Diversity is at the heart of who we are as brothers in London, diversity in nationality, language, church, and work, and yet the Lord unites us as one man:

"I pray...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you."

- John 17:20-21

> See related [video clip](#) of Servants of the Word household in London



Andy Pettman is senior coordinator of [Antioch Community](#) in London, UK. He is a member of the Church of England which is part of the Anglican communion, and a household leader of the [Servants of the Word](#), an ecumenical brotherhood of men living single for the Lord.



Embracing the “Present”

by Beth Melchor

Nothing makes you confront the reality of your own mortality as facing a life-threatening illness. I was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer January 2010. My suspicion was raised when I felt lumps in my armpit. I desire to live a full and meaningful life, then die young just like many of my favorite saints. So my first thought was, “Is this God’s answer to my prayer?”

As I waited for my annual check-up in a few days time, I scouted around for a surgeon who could perform the biopsy I anticipated. I kept everything to myself until the tests confirmed my suspicions. Surprisingly I never had sleepless nights even after I received the test results that read: “High probability of malignancy.”

Where did the peace come from? In prayer God reminded me of the First Principle and Foundation of Ignatian spirituality which reads:

“Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. The other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created. Hence, man is to make use of them in as far as they help him in the attainment of his end, and he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to

him.

Therefore, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life. The same holds for all other things. Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created.”

My bout with cancer was giving me the blessed opportunity to not prefer health to sickness, desiring only that I live for the end for which I was created. I knew that God could heal me in an instant, if He so desired. I had witnessed miraculous healings. But I also knew that He could also be glorified if someone was able to graciously bear an illness, such as cancer. So I was open to whatever God wanted for me.

The Challenges

The first real challenge was sharing this with my family. But since they are devout Catholics, they recovered quickly from the initial shock. The next challenge was to decide on the treatment from the various options. Having cancer invites numerous opinions and suggestions on possible treatments from well-meaning friends and acquaintances that it seems like you are in a maze. Add to this the burden of knowing that your decision will have life and death implications. Again, prayer is the source of wisdom and peace for such decisions. I decided not to go through an innovative treatment in China, which was very attractive to me because I had done mission work in China. I decided to undergo the standard treatment in Manila which meant six sessions of chemotherapy over three months to shrink the tumor, followed by surgery, then three months of radiation.

After my second session of chemotherapy, my hair began to fall, so I decided to shave my head. I had heard that this could be a traumatic experience for cancer patients, but I saw this as an opportunity to further express my life choice to live as a lay consecrated person. Another possible traumatic experience was the radical mastectomy, but I recalled a discussion about if you cut off a person's hand, the person is still a human; but if you cut off his head, you have taken what is essential, and the person ceases to be. I was grateful it was just a breast that was removed.

At every opportunity I gave thanks for the blessings received – that the nausea was not as bad as people say, that sisters from our community would accompany me during chemotherapy, that available resources made it possible for me to be treated, for the excellent health care professionals in the Philippines, for the help I received from so many people, even those I did not know personally, and for countless prayers that were offered on my behalf by so many friends and relatives. Giving thanks for the blessings instead of complaining about difficulties, made it easy for me to recognize how God was watching over every detail of my life even as I battled the “Big C”. By God's grace, I chose to fix my eyes on the “Bigger C,” Christ.

The Blessings

In prayer, God also led me to accept the possibility that even after the treatment my cancer could recur, and to accept the possibility that I might die from something else, like pneumonia, because my immune system was compromised due to the chemotherapy and removal of malignant lymph nodes. In all of this, I would continue to live my life as best as possible. I continued with my service in community. I completed the projects I began at work, opening up two new school campuses; after which I was granted my request for disability retirement.

Life in retirement has proven to be another blessing with so many opportunities to serve and freely give what I have freely received from the Lord. Life has become simpler having to choose which activities to devote my

limited energies to. Living with cancer sharpens one's criteria in making life choices. Life is deliberately reduced to what I believe is most important in God's eyes.

It's now been three and a half years since I was diagnosed with cancer. Having to visit my doctor every three months, I am constantly aware of how every day is a gift and how we should embrace the "present." If God had taken me home in 2010, I would have been at peace because I felt that the life God had given me to live was so blessed and coming home to him would have been like icing on the cake. Things were pretty much in place as I had already identified people who would take over the responsibilities that were entrusted to me. But if God extended my time and gave me more years, I would use it for His purposes. I am grateful to be alive in this Year of Faith where I continue to witness what God is doing in today's world and be part of it. As a brother in the Lord who died of cancer said, "This is a win-win situation." If I die, I get to be with the Lord. If I live, I get to continue building God's kingdom.

The Gift

For many, cancer is something they would as much as possible be spared of. But because of Christ, the bigger "C", it can be a wonderful blessing. We will all die one day. None of us lives forever. This just happens to be my path home to the loving arms of God. The words of St. Francis de Sales ring true for me:

"The everlasting God has in His wisdom foreseen from eternity the cross He now presents to you as a gift from His inmost Heart. This cross He now sends you He has considered with His all knowing eyes, understood with His divine mind, tested with His wise justice, warmed with loving arms and weighed with His own hands to see that it be not one inch too large and not one ounce too heavy for you. He has blessed it with His holy name, anointed it with His grace, perfumed it with His consolation, taken one last look at you and your courage, and then sent it to you from Heaven, a special greeting from God to you, an alms from the all-merciful love of God."

Beth Melchor has been a member of the [Joy of the Lord](#) community in the Philippines for the past 39 years. She serves as a senior woman leader in the community and represents the Asia region on the International Women's Coordinating Committee (IWCC). She also serves as the Vice-President of the [Bethany Association](#).

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Living Under the Grace of God

by Tom Caballes

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

- Ephesians 2:8-9

Probably not many of us have won the jackpot in the lotto. Why? Many just don't buy them, and the chances of winning are very remote. But in a way, we have won more than those who have won the grand prize in lottos. How? By being recipients of God's grace. Grace has been defined as having or receiving special favour with God. It is completely unearned, unmerited and undeserved. Our very life, every moment of it, is a grace from God. All that we have and all that we are comes from God. Who are we to be blessed so much that we receive grace upon grace from the Creator of everything? We are mere mortals and sinners – yet God made a way for us to share His divine fellowship by sending His Son to die for our own sins. Not only did He redeem us from our sinful nature, He also plans to spend eternity with us. We are so much blessed and so much to be thankful for, under the grace of God!

So how do we live our lives under God's grace?

1. Have an attitude of gratitude. Be thankful always. Every day is 'present;' it is a gift from God! Acknowledge Him at the start of the day and before you lay down to sleep. Learn to value, appreciate and prioritise relationships, especially the closest ones, as more important than gadgets – whom do you spend more time with? Your heart will be where your treasure is.
2. Learn to receive and take the good and the bad alike. We already have received so much from the grace of God; why can't we bear suffering, persecution, pain and disappointments in life? These things are meant to teach us to depend on God alone.
3. Use our time, talents, money and resources for God's Kingdom. Out of our debt of gratitude from a life under God's grace should result to a life well spent.
4. If choosing between which to focus on – our sinfulness or God's grace, always choose to focus on God's grace. Always be ready to repent and change our ways.
5. Always remember that in life's challenges and difficult moments, God is on our side. He will never abandon us, even if we do not understand everything. God's grace is full and whole, not partial nor temperamental. God's love is there until He carries us home.
6. We need to inculcate in us the eternal perspective – that the life we live passes away like grass, which is here today and gone tomorrow. Then comes eternity. There is nothing in this life, even our very own lives, which is worth keeping in comparison with eternity. What a privilege, what grace do we have – life with God for all eternity!

Other Scripture References

- Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. [2 Thessalonians 2:16-17]
- But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. [2 Peter 3:18]
- Other references: John 1:14, 16-17; Ephesians 3:16-19; Romans 3:23-24; Romans 5: 15, 17; 1 Corinthians 15:10.

For Personal Reflection and Group Sharing:

1. Do I truly appreciate the scope and the depth of God's grace?
2. Do I have a balance with being concerned with temporal matters and having eternal perspective in my life?

Tom Caballes is the National Senior Administrator and a National Coordinator of the [Lamb of God](#), a community of the Sword of the Spirit with 7 branches located throughout New Zealand. Tom also leads



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The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

“Be Merciful to Me, O God”

By Jeanne Kun

The Pharisee was not rejoicing so much in his own clean bill of health as in comparing it with the diseases of others. He came to the doctor. It would have been more worthwhile to inform him by confession of the things that were wrong with himself instead of keeping his wounds secret and having the nerve to crow over the scars of others. It is not surprising that the tax collector went away cured, since he had not been ashamed of showing where he felt pain.

Luke 18:9-14

9 [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

In the Spotlight

Contemporary Voices

The Pharisee does not receive God’s free gift of justification because he sees no need of it. He has justified himself. He confuses goodness (which he possessed) with perfection (which he did not). This is a common failing in religious people. Instead of looking *up*, at the all-holy God, the Pharisee looks *around*, at others. Discerning, rightly, that others have not achieved his level of goodness, he looks down on his fellow worshiper in the temple who, aware of how unworthy he is to stand in that sacred place, stands far off with bowed head, beating his breast in a gesture of humility as he pleads with God for mercy and forgiveness.

To compare ourselves with others is always a mistake. Such comparisons lead either to discouragement, when we find that others are better than we are; or to complacency, when we see that they are worse. Comparing ourselves with others is mistaken, too, because we do not know, and can never know, the difficulties against which others must contend.

– St. Augustine, *Sermon 351.1*

With the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus once again took his listeners by surprise. His Jewish contemporaries would have esteemed the Pharisee as a model of religious propriety, concurred with the man's high opinion of himself, and assumed that he deserved God's favor. They also would have looked down on the tax collector and scorned him. Yet, in another unsettling reversal of roles and expectations, Jesus commended not the "saint" but the "sinner."

Jesus' story made clear that this pious and devout Pharisee not only followed the law but even went beyond it. Jews were required to fast only one day each year, on the Day of Atonement; he fasted twice each week. Likewise, Jews tithed on their produce (Deuteronomy 14:22), whereas he tithed on his entire income. Glorifying in his good works, the Pharisee confessed no sin or fault before God, because he was blind to any. He saw only the sins of others.

Local tax collectors were considered ritually unclean by their fellow Jews since they were employed by the Roman forces occupying Palestine and associated with gentiles. They were further despised as corrupt scoundrels because they often defrauded their own countrymen. Jesus' listeners would have been appalled that such a man dared even to enter the temple, God's holy dwelling place. The tax collector knew he did not measure up to the law and didn't claim to be good or holy. Yet what was lacking in the Pharisee's prayer — recognition of his need for God and repentance — made up the whole of the tax collector's plea.

Humility is the recognition of the truth of who we are in relation to God. It is the ability to see clearly that God is our creator and the source of all life and goodness. Without him, we are nothing and have nothing. The tax collector had no illusions about himself or about God. He could see that by his actions that he had failed to please God and that he was greatly in need of God's mercy. The Pharisee, however, was harboring two illusions—one, that he had no sin, and the other, that his religious acts alone earned him God's favor. His greatest sin was pride. He trusted in himself rather than trusting in God.

When we fail to recognize our need for God, we also fail to recognize our need to pray. Whatever the tax collector's sins, it was his disposition of humility, his recognition of

If I had been dealt the hand of the sister or brother who seems to have done so badly in life, can I be confident that I might not have done even worse?"

—John Jay Hughes, *Stories Jesus Told: Modern Meditations on the Parables*

Understand!

1. What adjectives would you use to describe the Pharisee? What positive traits do you see in his actions and character? What flaws?
2. What does the Pharisee's prayer reveal about his image and concept of God? In your opinion, what was the point of his prayer?
3. Compare and contrast the tax collector's way of approaching God with the Pharisee's. Pay attention not only to the two men's words, but also to their gestures and posture.
4. How would you characterize the tax collector's attitude toward God? His attitude toward himself?
5. How do you think Jesus' hearers reacted to this parable? What reasons can you offer for your answer?

Grow!

1. What has this parable shown you about your image of God? Does your understanding of God or your attitude toward him need to be corrected in any way?
2. In what ways has this parable challenged or changed your way of thinking about yourself? About the value you place on your efforts to please God?
3. Do you feel comfortable identifying yourself with the tax collector? Why or why not? What

the truth, and his desire for forgiveness that “justified” him. He received God’s mercy not because he deserved it or even because he thought he did, but because he asked for it through humble prayer.

Jesus told this parable to “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (Luke 18:1). Its message was not directed to Jesus’ first-century hearers alone. As we look into the mirror of God’s word, may we have the humility to see ourselves as we truly are — and the grace to see the Lord as he truly is. For our God is merciful and compassionate, always willing and eager to “justify” each and every one of us when we come to him with repentant hearts.

In the Spotlight

The Jesus Prayer

For centuries, Christians across the world have invoked the name of the Lord in the “Jesus Prayer,” which is expressed most commonly as “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us sinners.” The prayer finds its origins in St. Paul’s beautiful hymn about Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins, which ends,

“so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:6-11).

The Jesus Prayer incorporates, as well, the humble entreaty of the tax collector in the parable and the cry of the blind men who begged Jesus for their sight. Indeed, the Jesus Prayer is so powerful that “[b]y it the heart is opened to human wretchedness and the Savior’s mercy” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2667).

With the words of the Jesus Prayer, we make a perfect profession of faith, for it sums up the essentials of what we know and believe about the Lord. As we pray these few simple words, we confess our own sinfulness, cry out for God’s mercy, and open ourselves to his forgiveness and his healing presence in our lives. Busy as we are with our families, our work, and our daily responsibilities, we can enter more deeply into a life of continual prayer by

have you learned from him and from his prayer?

4. How easily do you fall into the trap of comparing your good deeds or your practice of the faith with the actions of others? Why? How can you avoid this pitfall?

5. By looking at the Pharisee, do you recognize any ways in which you’ve been blind to your own failings? If so, write a prayer to Jesus, asking him to forgive you and to help you change.

In the Spotlight

From the Catechism of the Catholic Church

[W]hen we pray, do we speak from the height of our pride and will, or “out of the depths” of a humble and contrite heart? He who humbles himself will be exalted; humility is the foundation of prayer. Only when we humbly acknowledge that “we do not know how to pray as we ought,” are we ready to receive freely the gift of prayer. (2559)

[The parable of] “the Pharisee and the tax collector,” concerns the *humility* of heart that prays. “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” The Church continues to make this prayer its own: *Kyrie eleison!* (2613)

Reflect!

1. Reflect on the gestures and postures you use when you pray. Perhaps you genuflect, bow your head, kneel, or lift up your hands. These outward physical actions are meant to be an expression of the inward disposition of the heart.

When you perform such actions, are you conscious of their meaning? How might you use such actions more effectively in the way you relate to God?

repeating the Jesus Prayer frequently throughout the day.

In the Spotlight

Wisdom from the Church Fathers

The one guilty of insolent behavior suffered the loss of his justice and forfeited his reward by his bold self-reliance. He was judged inferior to a humble man and a sinner because in his self-exaltation he did not await the judgment of God but pronounced it himself. Never place yourself above anyone, not even great sinners. Humility often saves a sinner who has committed many terrible transgressions.

– St. Basil the Great, *On Humility*

In the case of that Pharisee who was praying, the things he said were true. Since he was saying them out of pride and the tax collector was telling his sins with humility, the confession of sins of the last was more pleasing to God than the acknowledgment of the almsgiving of the first. It is more difficult to confess one's sins than one's righteousness. God looks on the one who carries a heavy burden. The tax collector therefore appeared to him to have had more to bear than the Pharisee had. He went down more justified than the Pharisee did, only because of the fact he was humble.

– St. Ephrem the Syrian,
Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron

The foolish Pharisee stood there bold and broad, lifting up his eyes without a qualm, bearing witness to himself and boastful. The other feels shame for his conduct. He is afraid of his judge. He beats his breast. He confesses his offenses. He shows his illness to the physician, and he prays that he will have mercy. What is the result? Let us hear what the judge says. He says, "This man went down to his house justified rather than the other."

– St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Luke*

This article is excerpted from *Treasures Uncovered: The Parables of Jesus*, by Jeanne Kun, © 2005 The Word Among Us Press. Used with permission. This book can be ordered online at [The Word Among Us Press](http://www.wordamonguspress.com).

Jeanne Kun is President of [Bethany Association](http://www.bethanyassociation.org) and a senior woman leader in the [Word of Life Community](http://www.wordoflifecommunity.org), Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA.

2. Reflect on the following passages to enrich your understanding of the parable you have just studied:

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.*

*For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me. . . .*

*Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

(Psalm 51:1-3, 7)

For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly;

but the haughty he perceives from far away.

(Psalm 138:6)

*For thus says the high and lofty one
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:*

I dwell in the high and holy place,

*and also with those who are contrite and
humble in spirit,*

to revive the spirit of the humble,

and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Isaiah 57:15)

Jesus said: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:1, 3)

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. (1 Peter 5:6)

Act!

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

> [See other articles by Jeanne Kun](#)

Pray the Jesus Prayer as often as you can this week — while you are driving, doing household chores, taking a quiet pause in the day, jogging — whenever it comes to mind. Let the words of this prayer sink deep into your heart and remind you that you are always in the presence of God, no matter what you are doing.

Illustration of the Pharisee and the Publican (top) of page) by James Tissot

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Acceptance and Forgiveness

by Ana Aragon

The reason why I am here again with [YouthWorks-Detroit](#) is just because God wanted me to be here. I have fallen in love with the city of Detroit. I placed my decision to come back in God's hands; truly praying that I would accept whatever He chose. I wanted to go home, see my family, be there for my brother's 11th birthday; be in a place of comfort and relaxation. I remember praying, "God, if you want me to go to Detroit; you will need to give me motivation and energy, because I have none. I don't know if I'll be able to endure it after this hard year but here I am, send me."

This has been a difficult year for me; with lots of trials. The hardest trial came in December when my best friend Andrew died from brain cancer. I never thought he would die; God can save him; God will heal him. He did not. In my mind I had a lot of "what if's:" what if I had boldly prayed over him for healing, what if I hadn't come back to the states for school, what if I had visited more often....

During [Detroit Summer Outreach](#) (DSO) last year I was praying for him to accept his condition and to have a deeper relationship with God because he was in denial and wanted to hear nothing about God. I prayed for him constantly. I wished he would someday – when he was healthy again – do DSO and grow in his relationship with the Lord, particularly because he loved serving. After DSO 2012 I visited him and he told me, "Vic, I have been able to see God's hand in the midst of this. I think everyone thinks I will be healed, but I don't know God's plan, and I'm ok with that." God answered my prayers

and even though that was the last time I saw him God blessed my time with him. We had pizza, talked, joked, laughed, had Fanta. He was awake over 3 hours, when he normally fell asleep every 15 to 20 min because of the medication.

This semester I've felt sad, guilty and jealous. Why? Because I was diagnosed with skin cancer in May 2012 and yet I am well and Andrew died. I didn't "suffer" like he did. I only had surgery and needed to stay away from the sun. I was, and still am jealous that he got to heaven first. A stupid thought, but however it was there and it was a barrier between me and God. I felt guilty because I am here, alive and serving, and he is not. All the "what ifs" made me feel guilty as well, thinking maybe there was something I could have done to "save" him.

DSO has been a process of Acceptance and for there to be Acceptance there needs to be Forgiveness. I had to forgive myself, even if it wasn't my fault, and come to accept the things that are. In the words of Andrew, "God has a perfect plan. Life is a mountain range, with lots of ups and downs, and wonderful views. It doesn't matter what people see or think, what matters is that God is always by your side and will never leave you."

I had always thought about the words "Here I am" in the context of "Here I am, send me," but now I have a new point of view. God tells us many times "Here I am." So what has God doing in my life during DSO? Well, pretty much just showing me time after time that He is here.

Bio and update: My name is Ana Victoria Aragon and I am 24 years old. I was born and raised in Costa Rica. (I lived in Ann Arbor when I was 1 till I was 4 because my dad was getting his PHD at the University of Michigan). I first came to Detroit on December 1st 2009 to serve 3 months and ended staying for a year. I wanted to do the gap program, but I couldn't because it wasn't in my region. God made everything work and I got into the program officially September through November 2010. My first Detroit summer outreach was the summer of 2010 and I loved it and wanted to come back. I did DSO again in 2012 but could not stay in Detroit the rest of the year because I was focusing on my studies. I did DSO once again in 2013 and am now serving as a volunteer with Youth Works whenever I can with the Girls Youth group. At present I am getting a Liberal Arts Associates Degree in Washtenaw Community College and will graduate this summer. I love serving and I try to finish all my homework and go to Detroit on the weekends.

See related stories from YouthWorks-Detroit >

- [Healing for my Soul](#), by Anna Bode
- [Living and Serving in God's City](#), by Mark Petritsch
- [Acceptance and Forgiveness](#), by Ana Aragon
- [Detroit - Home Sweet Home](#), by Mikayla Pardon
- [Called to Mission in Detroit](#), by Chad and Doris Shellabarger
- [Acting in Faith](#), by Evan Kresta
- [Trusting God in New Ways](#), by Mary Sarah Erickson
- [God's Light Prevails Even in All-time Lows](#), by Shane Dunne



Living and Serving in God's City

by Mark Petritsch

Detroit used to be the furthest thing from my mind. Before coming, I couldn't even imagine living and serving here for a year of my life. I couldn't fathom living with religious brothers and working with inner-city kids. And yet I have been serving here since September 2012 and finished with the [Detroit Summer Outreach](#) program.

Before arriving in the Motor City, my relationship with God wasn't very good. I hadn't fully given God a chance. I grew up in a Christian family in New Jersey with good and faith-filled parents. I always knew God was real but I was more concerned about how I could get blessed than how I could bless others. I was selfish and I wasn't ready to sacrifice everything for God.

One day around last June, I received a text from one of my youth leaders telling me about a program called Standing in the Gap and encouraging me to apply for it. Following his good advice, I applied and got placed in Detroit: probably the last place I wanted to go. However, God had a plan and when I look back I realize that this year has been amazing and I've received many blessings from the Lord. I've learned a lot, but I've also realized that I have so much more to learn.

Detroit used to be the furthest thing from my mind. And now it has a special place in my heart. I'm living and serving in God's city...and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. God sought after me – I didn't seek after Him. And now I know my need for God and the importance of having a relationship with Him! What a great adventure the life He has for us!

[Mark Petritsch grew up in the The People of Hope community in New Jersey, USA. He did a GAP year serving with [YouthWorks-Detroit](#) between August 2012 and July 2013. He is currently a student participating in University Christian Outreach (UCO) in Lansing, Michigan, and participating in a UCO men's household.]

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Healing for My Soul...

by Anna Bode

I can hardly believe this is my third year working for [YouthWorks-Detroit](#). It's been 2.5 years since I've left the lovely town of Saint Paul, Minnesota. It was a comfortable place filled with family and friends, my home town, my security – my life was there. A great deal has changed since moving to Detroit. The greatest change of which was my parents' shocking and sudden separation during my first Christmas break. I came back to Detroit feeling exhausted, broken, and insecure. I felt anchorless. I felt alone.

But I wasn't. I came back to a welcoming, loving, and accepting community that has carried me through the darkest and scariest time in my life these past 2 years. They have prayed with me, loved me, and have patiently comforted me in my sorrow of losing the one thing that I had always taken for granted-my family.

The longer I've stayed here, the more I've let my roots dig deep into this land of Detroit. It's become my home. The problems here are my problems. The excitements here are my excitements. These people are my people. Their sorrows are my sorrows. Their joys are my joys. They are my family.

When practically thinking about this, it doesn't make any sense. I mean, think about it: what does a white girl from middle class Minnesota have anything to do with a predominantly African American city with rampant poverty? Well, nothing if you think about it that way. But, if you think about why the Lord has called me here in a time of brokenness and despair, when I felt alone and without a family, then it makes absolutely perfect sense.



Detroit, a place of “brokenness,” is where I have found healing for my soul. I have experienced Detroit as a place of Hope, despite overwhelming despair everywhere you may look. I have found Detroit to be a place of rich and abundant relationships and a place where I belong, where I am home.

My job with YouthWorks-Detroit gives me the privilege of visiting our youth at their families' homes several times a week. I have encountered the utmost acceptance, welcome, hospitality, and love into not only their homes, but also their hearts. They have given me a place in their family.

On one of countless occasions, on a typical Monday afternoon, I went to one of our high school girls' homes. I was sitting on their stairs chatting with a girl from youth group I've known the past couple of years, talking about life, her plans after high school, her dreams and goals. We hear her mom wake up from a nap. She was exhausted after working all night. She's trying to start her own business and has been experiencing many setbacks, including a lack of resources for important pieces of equipment. She was sharing with me her worries, fears, and how she has been crying out to God to provide for her. She was feeling at the end of her rope, with hardly a cent to give for the next due rent, and was on the verge of tears. I felt like I was supposed to fix her problems, but I was left feeling helpless. I decided to share with her my own issues and sorrows. I decided to share with her how I've been crying out to God these last 2 years of my family falling apart.

We ended up praying. Her and her five daughters and I, huddled on the stairway in the projects in Detroit. Crying out to God. Praising Him. Thanking Him. Asking for His provision. Asking for His favor. Asking for Him to touch us and give us strength and Grace to keep following Him. We needed His healing, feeling broken as we did. Each of us prayed, and as we did, we experienced God's presence. He was with us. In the brokenness, He was there. He was our refuge and anchor.

At the end of this time together, we laughed as we wiped tears from our eyes. We rejoiced that God

had brought this divine moment together to encourage and transform us. I left that house knowing their love as only of a family's could be. God had provided. He was with us. He was enough for us. He even gives us a place in His family so we don't ever have to be alone. He is our Father and we are His children and He will take care of His own.

Bio: I grew up in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where I became involved in Saint Paul's Outreach in 2008 at the University of Minnesota. I participated in [Detroit Summer Outreach](#) in 2009 and had a powerful experience. I came back in 2011 to do a Gap year in Detroit. From then on, I've been working in various roles, such as leading the girls' side of the high school youth group starting on my Gap year and continuing to do so last year and this year. I have lead the DSO women's household the past two summers and now I am the Women's Mission Leader of [YouthWorks-Detroit](#). I have also been doing some teaching and tutoring at a couple different high schools in Detroit for the last couple of years.



Youth-Works Detroit Staff: Top row from left to right: Evan Kresta (Gapper), Camille Chippewa (Bezalel), Ryan Corr (Gapper), Emily Hoffman (Finances/Urban Encounter); Front Row: Matt Hagen (Gapper), Chad Shellabarger (Program Director), Anna Bode (Women's Mission Leader)

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Detroit – Home Sweet Home

by Mikayla Pardon

After spending my first summer (2012) serving with [Detroit Summer Outreach](#) (DSO) and then returning again in the summer of 2013, I found many things the same and different. The one thing that remained the same from one summer to the next was my need for Jesus.

Every time I return to Detroit, whether for a weekend or a summer, I feel as though I have stepped into the presence of God. I find myself praying and turning to God much more than I do anywhere else. It is not just that I turn to him during times of need, which are plentiful, but even just doing monotonous tasks. It is a very freeing experience being able to place everything in God's hands and leave it there. I can truly rest in Him knowing that everything necessary will be provided in due time.

My favorite thing about Detroit is the very real presence of God that is experienced, which did not change over the past 2 summers. What has changed is my task in Detroit. I would say that last summer was my "honeymoon" stage of living in Detroit. Everything was perfect – the Bezalel kids, household, prayer life, and the service. This past summer has been a whole new experience. As staff, I have more responsibility for others, which made for a less-than-care-free summer. My first summer I was just told what to do and when to do it. The roles reversed this past summer when I had to lead and tell

others what to do. While leading I was able to experience the other side of the program, and see how much of the program is truly in God's hands.

There were daily miracles that made all of the practical aspects of our programs fall into place, sometimes later than we would have liked, but they did. In addition, the added responsibility opened my eyes to all the background work that happens with any program. It made me more appreciative for the people who plan programs that I can just attend in a carefree manner. And even though I was no longer in the "honeymoon" stages, I was still full of joy and grateful to be in Detroit and in the presence of God for a second summer.

Mikayla Pardon is from Imlay City, Michigan. She currently lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She is a student at Grand Valley State University and also works as a substitute teacher.

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Discovering Our True Destiny

by Stephen Bick

One thing about being a Christian is that you have a destiny. Every piece of the world has a function and a design, and among those pieces are each and every human being, all of whom have the terrifying, end-weighted privilege of discovering (not creating) what they are for, what the meaning of their life is, and what to do about it.

Meaning & purpose

What is this meaning, and this purpose? Love!

I hear eyes rolling, so a definition and a defense. Love is a terrifically vague word – is it a feeling (I'm in love) or an action (I will always love you)? Does it have something to do with sex? Is friendship love, or a different kind of love?

This says a lot about the English language and the culture that bred it. We're very good at poetry, but not very good at philosophy. The Greeks had at least four words for love and one of them, *agape*, meant something very vague until it was essentially reclaimed by Paul and used to mean the action of self-giving, like the love of Christ for the Church.

An excellent short definition by J Budziszewski states that love [*agape*] is ‘to will the true good of another person.’ Good entails their flourishing, their happiness – not just a vague niceness, or even being liked by the other person, but truly having their best interests at heart.

This may seem boring or reductive, but a clue that it isn’t either can be found in the variety of good people in fiction and history (Atticus Finch [[character](#) from [To Kill a Mockingbird](#)] and St Francis of Assisi are superlatively different, but one doesn’t seem to be more good than the other but good in different ways) and in the difficulty of knowing how to actually show love to someone.

The myriad ways – encouraging speech, gifts, sticking up for them privately – show the diversity of goodness, and how it grows. Usher’s lyric “There are so many ways to love you” is cringe-worthy because you know that he can only think of one.

Discovering who you are

So, while “Loving God and other people” is the final answer, the meaning of life, this is fantastically diverse, more different by far from person to person than appearance, and a big part of the adventure of the Christian life is discovering who you are, what aspects of goodness you see most clearly, and launching into them with aplomb, in order to become yourself.

Many Christians are perhaps overly focused on the ‘state of life’ side of this – am I called to be married or to be single? – And understandably so, but this is just a part of the whole of ourselves we must discover, we shouldn’t just stop here.

It seems clear to me from the course of my life, and my love of it, that a big part of my call is to point, to herald, to announce the Lord in all his glory, and maybe this is why I like the season of Advent so much, because it says ‘stay awake, hope, watch, because He is coming!’, because it says what I want my life to say.

Even though the season of Advent is over, it speaks of human nature: the transcendent longing that everyone experiences and, since I know who the longing is for, must communicate this to people. That’s the starting point that I have now, and enough to get on with.

Stephen Bick lives in Cambridge, UK, where he studying at Cambridge University for a BA in music. He is a choral scholar at Gonville and Caius college, and in his free time is getting involved with Christian life on campus. Stephen grew up in London, UK and has been actively involved in Kairos and Antioch Community.

Check out his blog: [To Build A Fire](#).

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Dark was the Night

from [The Night](#), by Henry Vaughan

...There is in God, some say,
A deep but dazzling darkness, as men here
Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear.
O for that night! where I in Him
Might live invisible and dim!

[The world's last night](#)

by Stephen Bick

Soon, so soon, will come the world's last night
And all the fields await the coming dawn.
All rivers, trees, fixed in heraldic light
To greet their Lord who comes to claim His own

Nothing will be lost, no; we will find
That fiercest joys on earth were only dreams
Of realer lands to come and broadened time
But much will be packed up, no longer seen

Hope will raise its anchor, minor chords
Resolve as faith, all blinking, gains its sight.
Do not mourn these things but, man, be awed:
The stars preside over the world's last night

Stephen Bick lives in Cambridge, UK, where he studying at Cambridge University for a BA in music. He is a choral scholar at Gonville and Caius college, and in his free time is getting involved with Christian life on campus. Stephen grew up in London, UK and has been actively involved in Kairos and Antioch Community.

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“Our Hearts Are Restless - Until They Rest in Thee”

– from the Confessions of Augustine (354-430 AD)

*Can any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty? How magnificent his strength! How inscrutable his wisdom! Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you *thwart the proud*. But still, since he is a part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.* (Confessions, Book 1,1)

The following selection of quotes come from St. Augustine of Hippo's autobiographical book, Confessions. Augustine, in the following passages, sheds light on the struggle of the will and its surrender to Christ. - ed.

A House Divided

My inner self was a house divided against itself. The mind gives an order to the body and it is at once obeyed, but when it gives an order to itself, it is resisted. What is the cause? the mind orders itself to make an act of will and it would not give the order unless it willed to do so; yet it does not carry out its own command. the mind commands the mind to make an act of will, these two are one and the same and yet the order is not obeyed. (Confessions, Book 8,8)

Weighed Down by Habit

The reason the command is not obeyed is that it is not given with the full will. Therefore it is no strange phenomenon partly to will to do something and partly not to will to do it. It is a disease of the mind which does not wholly rise to the heights where it is lifted by the truth, because it is weighed down by habit. So there are two wills in us, because neither by itself is the whole will and each possesses what the other lacks. (Confessions, Book 8,9)

Torn Between Conflicting Wills

When I was trying to reach a decision about serving the Lord my God, as I had long intended to do so, it was I who willed to take this course and again it was I who willed not to take it. So I was at odds with myself. My action did not come from me but from the sinful principal that dwells in me (Romans 7:17). It was part of the punishment of a sin freely committed by Adam, my first father. (Confessions, Book 8,10)

On the Brink of the Resolution

This was the nature of my sickness, I was in torment, reproaching myself more bitterly than ever as I

twisted and turned in my chain. I hoped that my chain might be broken once for all. I tried again and again and came a little closer to my goal and then a little closer still, so that I could almost reach out and grasp it. But I did not reach it. I could not reach out and grasp it because I held back from the step by which I should die to death and become alive to life. And the closer I came to the moment which was to mark the great change in me, the more I shrank from it is horror. But it did not drive me back or turn me from my purpose; it merely left me hanging in suspense. (Confessions, Book 8,11)

My State of Indecision

I was held back by my old attachments. In my state of indecision, these old attachments, the delights of the world, the lusts of the flesh kept me from tearing myself away, from shaking myself free of them and leaping across the barrier to the other side where you were calling me Lord. Habit was too strong for me when it asked 'Do you think you can live without these things?'

Trembling at the Barrier

I was overcome with shame because I was still listening to the futile mutterings of my lower self and I was still hanging in suspense. But my Lord seemed to be saying to me 'Close your ears to the unclean whispers of your body so that it may be mortified. it tells you of things that delight you, but not such things as the law of the Lord your God has to tell.' (Confessions, Book 8,11)

Why Not Now?

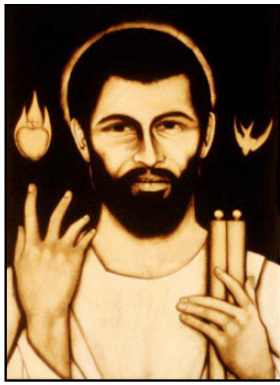
I probed the hidden depths of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets from it and when I mustered them all before the eyes of my heart, a great storm broke out within me. Somehow I flung myself down beneath a fig tree and gave way to the tears which now streamed from my eyes. For I felt that I was still captive of my sins and I cried out 'How long shall I go on saying Tomorrow, tomorrow? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?' (Confessions, Book 8,12)

I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the singing of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or girl I don't know but again and again it repeated the refrain, 'Take it and read, take it and read.' I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall. (Confessions, Book 8,12)

I hurried back to the place I had kept the book containing Paul's epistles. I seized it and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: 'Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites.' (Romans 13:13-14) I had no wish to read more nor no need to do so. For an instant as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled. I marked the place with my finger and closed the book. You converted me to yourself, so that I no longer placed any hope in this world but stood firmly upon the rule of faith. (Confessions, Book 8,12)

[Excerpts from *Confessions of Augustine*, translation by R.S. Pines-Coffin (c) 1961, Penguin Books and Devotional Classics by Richard Foster, Hodder & Stoughton]

[Top film clip: [Restless Heart](#), DVD film by [Ignatius Press](#), 2012]



Aurelius Augustine was born in 345 in the town of Tagaste, in Roman North Africa, in what is today Algeria. His mother was Monica, a very devout Christian who had a significant influence on her son's life. His father, named Patricius, was a pagan of significant status in society. Patricius became a Christian shortly before his death.

Augustine was educated at Carthage where he enjoyed academic success. He also enjoyed the party life, and at the age of 17 fell in love with a woman whom he never named. They lived together unmarried for 13 years and had a son whom Augustine named Adeodatus, meaning "gift from God." His son died in his youth.

At the age of 19, after reading Cicero's *Hortensius*, Augustine fell in love with philosophy. He later wrote, "It gave me different values and priorities. Suddenly every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour in my heart." While he pursued Platonic philosophy and the theology of the Manichaens, a Christian heretical sect, he became restless for truth and virtue. Shortly before his 30th birthday, Augustine encountered Ambrose, the saintly bishop of Milan. Augustine was moved by Ambrose's example and his inspired teaching and preaching of the gospel. At the age of 32 Augustine found peace with God and was baptized by Ambrose during the Easter liturgy in 387. Augustine returned to North Africa and formed a monastic community with a group of friends. He was ordained a priest in 391 and became a noted preacher. In 396 he reluctantly became a bishop and remained the bishop of Hippo until his death in 430. He left his monastic community, but continued to lead a monastic life with the parish priests of Hippo in his episcopal residence. Augustine died on August 28, 430, during the siege of Hippo by the Vandals.

Augustine was a prolific writer and original thinker. His numerous writings, including theological treatises, sermons, scripture commentaries, and philosophical dialogues, number into the hundreds. His autobiography, the *Confessions*, was considered the first Western autobiography. It was highly read among his contemporaries and has continued as a classic throughout the ages.

Augustine is one of the most important figures in the development of Western Christianity. He is esteemed as a great Latin church father and a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church. Many Protestants consider him to be one of the theological fathers of Reformation teaching. Among Orthodox he is called St. Augustine the Blessed.

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Prayer of Augustine

lyrics and music by Ed Conlin

Click  to listen to an MP3 [audio clip](#)

Lyrics to *Prayer of Augustine*

O Beauty ancient, O Beauty so new
Late have I loved Thee and feebly yet do.
Though you were with me, I was not with You.
Then You shone Your face and I was blind no more

Chorus:
My heart searches restlessly and finds no rest 'till it rests in Thee.

O Seeker You sought for me, Your love has found me;
I am taken by thee.

I sought this world and chased its finer things,
Yet were these not in You, they would not have been.
My ceaseless longing hid the deeper truth,
In all my desirings, I was desiring You.

Lord, in my deafness You cried out to me.
I drew my breath and now Your fragrance I breathe
O Fount of Life, You are forever the same;
O Fire of Love, come set me aflame.

Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee"

- St. Augustine of Hippo

Ed's reflection on Augustine's prayer....

"While reading Augustine's "Confessions", I was deeply moved by this conversion prayer (one of the most beautiful prayers I've ever heard)...wouldn't this be wonderful if the spirit of this prayer could be enhanced by holy music!

I remember asking God if he would just frame this prayer with the right melody. Eventually, this came out. Praise God!"

There is a space formed by the particular shape of our life. It is meant for God himself to indwell. This must be felt as a lack... and it comes about through daily circumstances. It may be caused by the cavern of a lonely heart, the ache of a lost one, the yearning that comes from "not yet being home." In truth we are to glory in this emptiness -- for it is the price we pay for such an immense dignity. To wait in courage for God to fill our particular emptiness is one of the most profound of love's acts.

The song *Prayer of Augustine* is included in a Music CD entitled, *Taken by Love*, produced by [In His Presence](#). The CD and sheet music can be ordered from [In His Presence](#). See online order page, or order form, click on *Taken by Love CD*. Individual can purchase the album or the mp3 as a download from I-Tunes or Rhapsody or any mp3 distributor.

Ed Conlin is a member of the [Servants of the Word](#), a missionary brotherhood of men living single for the Lord. He lives in community in the inner city of Detroit, Michigan, USA, and works as a licensed substance abuse counselor and chaplain with the Capuchin Franciscan Ministries in Detroit.



My Confession by St. Patrick of Ireland (387 - 460 AD)

Adapted and abridged for modern readers by Don Schwager

I pray that those who believe in God and who read this confession, which I, Patrick, an unlearned sinner have written in Ireland, may recognize that whatever I achieved or taught that was pleasing to God, was done so by the gift of God. This is my confession before I die.

Rebellious youth, captivity, and conversion

I am Patrick, a sinner, son of Calpornius, a deacon of the church at Bannavem Taburniae. When I was a rebellious 16 year old, I was taken captive to Ireland along with many others. I did not truly know God at the time. God, however, took pity on my youthfulness and ignorance, and he watched over me and protected me, and consoled me as a father would his son. He opened my mind to see the futility of my unbelief and to remind me of my sins, and he helped me to turn to him with all of my heart.

God's chastisement in the land of captivity helped me to recognize him. He gave me so many graces and favors that I cannot remain silent nor cease to exalt him and confess his wonders before every nation under heaven.

For I do confess [as stated in the ancient Christian Creed] that there is



no other God, but God the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ, who always existed with the Father and the Spirit. All things visible and invisible were created by him. Christ became a man and conquered death for us. When he ascended to the Father in heaven he received all power over every name and creature in heaven, on earth, and in hell, so that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is both Lord and God (Philippians 2:9-11). Christ will come again as judge of the living and the dead. He has abundantly poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit upon all who believe in Christ. The Spirit, who is the pledge of our unending life with God, makes us sons of God and co-heirs with Christ. We worship one God who is a Trinity of persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.



My ignorance and youthful sins held me back

I had thought of writing my testimony for some time, but I hesitated until now, because I feared the criticism of others, since my upbringing was very simple and rustic, and I was unlearned and did not know the Scriptures like many others. I acted foolishly in my youth and my life was like a stone lying in a deep mire. But why make excuses now in my old age for my youthful ignorance and sins which prevented me from choosing the path of wisdom? And who will believe me, even though I should say it again? As a young man, almost a beardless boy, I was taken captive before I knew what I should desire and what I should shun. So, even today I still feel ashamed to speak of my ignorance and my lack of eloquence.

The Lord had to humble me first through my captivity to get his attention. Then in his mercy he came and raised me up and lifted me to the very top of a wall. And from there I can only shout out in gratitude to the Lord for his great favors which he showed me without measure.

Whether you be great or small, learned or simple, listen, and consider how God summoned me, a fool and a wretch in this world, to serve him with reverence, faith, and humility. It was the love of Christ that inspired me to give my life in service to this people. So, after many years of hardships and trials during my captivity, the Lord granted me, his unworthy and humble servant, this great favor among the people here in Ireland, something which I neither hoped for nor imagined as a youth.



The Spirit was burning within me

During my captivity the Spirit was burning within me. But after I reached Ireland, my first job was to look after a flock of sheep every day. While out in the fields, I grew accustomed to pray many times a day. More and more the love of God, my respect for him, and my faith increased. My daily prayer times multiplied into the hundreds, and my prayers in the night were also numerous. Besides I used to stay out in the forests and on the mountain and I would wake up before daylight to pray in the snow, in icy coldness, in rain. But these conditions didn't stop me nor make

me feel ill, because, as I now see, the Spirit was burning within me at that time.

And it was there of course that one night in my sleep I heard a voice saying to me: “You do well to fast: soon you will depart for your home country.” And again, a very short time later, there was a voice prophesying: “Behold, your ship is ready.” And it was not close by, but, as it happened, two hundred miles away, where I had never been nor known any person. And shortly thereafter I turned about and fled from the man whom I had been serving for six years, and I came, by the power of God who directed my route to advantage (and I was afraid of nothing), until I reached that ship.



And on the same day that I arrived, the ship was setting out from the place, and I said that I had the wherewithal to sail with them; and the steersman was displeased and replied in anger, sharply: “By no means attempt to go with us.” Hearing this I left them to go to the hut where I was staying, and on the way I began to pray, and before the prayer was finished I heard one of them shouting loudly after me: “Come quickly because the men are calling you.” And immediately I went back to them and they started to say to me: “Come, because we are admitting you out of good faith; make friendship with us in any way you wish.” (And so, on that day, out of fear of God, I resolved not to let these men influence me, but nevertheless I had hopes that they would come to faith in Jesus Christ, because they were barbarians.) And for this I continued with them, and we put to sea speedily.

My two month journey with barbarians

After three days we reached land, and for twenty-eight days journeyed through uninhabited country, and the food ran out, and hunger overtook them. One day the steersman began saying, “Why is it, Christian? You say your God is great and all-powerful, then why can you not pray for us? For we may perish of hunger. It is unlikely indeed that we shall ever see another human being.” In fact, I said to them, confidently, “Be converted and believe with all your heart in the Lord who is God, because nothing is impossible for him, so that today he will send food for you on your road, until you be sated, because everywhere he abounds.” With God's help this came to pass. Behold, a herd of swine appeared on the road before our eyes, and they slew many of them, and remained there for two nights, and they were full of their meat and well restored, for many of them had fainted and would otherwise have been left half dead by the wayside. And after this they gave the utmost thanks to God, and I was esteemed in their eyes, and from that day they had food in



abundance. They discovered wild honey, besides, and they offered a share to me, and one of them said: "It is a sacrifice." Thanks be to God, I tasted none of it.

Satan attacked me violently

The very same night while I was sleeping Satan attacked me violently, as I will remember as long as I shall be in this body. There fell on top of me as it were, a huge rock, and I was unable to lift or move it. But for some odd reason unknown to me, I began to call upon Elijah. Meanwhile I saw the sun rising in the sky, and while I was crying out "Elijah, Elijah" with all my might, lo and behold, the brilliance of that sun fell upon me and immediately shook me free of all the weight; and I believe that I was aided by Christ my Lord, and that his Spirit then was crying out for me, and I hope that it will be so in the day of my affliction, just as it says in the Gospel: "In that hour," the Lord declares, "it is not you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking in you."

On the journey he provided us with food and fire and dry weather every day, until on the tenth day we came across some people. As I mentioned above, we had journeyed through an unpopulated country for twenty-eight days, and in fact the night that we came upon people we had no food.

And a second time, after many years, I was taken captive. On the first night I was with my captors, I heard a divine prophecy, saying to me: "You shall be with them for two months." And so it happened. On the sixtieth night the Lord delivered me from their hands.



Return to Britain

And after a few years I was again in Britain with my parents, and they welcomed me as a son, and asked me, in faith, that after the great tribulations I had endured I should not go anywhere else away from them. Of course, there, in a vision of the night, I saw a man whose name was Victor coming from Ireland with innumerable letters, and he gave me one of them, and I read the beginning of the letter: "The Voice of the Irish," and as I was reading the beginning of the letter I seemed at that moment to hear the voices of those who were beside the forest of Foclut which is near the western sea, and they were crying as if with one voice: "We beg you, holy youth, that you come and walk again among us." I was stung intensely in my heart so that I could read no more, and thus I awoke. Thanks be to God, because after

so many years the Lord heard their cry.

Another night – God knows, I do not, whether within me or beside me – I heard many words which I could not understand, except at the end of the speech it was represented thus: "He who gave his life for you, he it is who speaks within you," and thus I awoke, joyful.

On a second occasion I saw someone praying within me, and I was, as it were, inside my own body, and I heard him above me – that is, above my inner self. He was praying powerfully with sighs. As this continued, I was astonished and pondered who it could be who was praying within me. But at the end of the prayer it was revealed to me that it

was the Holy Spirit. So I awoke and remembered the Apostle's words, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26).



Monk's beehive cell on top of Skellig Michael, Ireland, 6th-7th century

A living sacrifice for Christ my Lord

Thus I give untiring thanks to God who kept me faithful in the day of my temptation, so that today I may confidently offer my life as a living sacrifice for Christ my Lord. Who am I, Lord, that you should give me so great a calling – to exalt and magnify your name in whatever place you put me, even if it be among barbarians, or some affliction?

Whatever befalls me, be it good or bad, I will accept it equally, and give thanks always to God. I will put my trust in him and dare to undertake so holy and so wonderful a work, so that I might imitate those who have gone before as heralds of the Gospel to all peoples, even to the ends of the earth. This commission is being fulfilled even today, as we witness the Gospel being proclaimed in far away places such as this land.

It is tedious to describe in detail all my labors one by one. I will tell briefly how the most holy God frequently delivered me from slavery, and from the twelve trials with which my soul was threatened, from man traps as well, and from things I am not able to put into words. I would not cause offense to readers, but I have God as witness who knew all things even before they happened, that, though I was a poor ignorant waif, still he gave me abundant warnings through divine prophecy.

Whence came to me such great wisdom which was not my own, I who neither knew the number of days nor had knowledge of God? Whence came to me so great a gift of knowing and loving God, even though I should lose both my homeland and family? It was not grace of my own, but grace from God who gave me strength to preach the Gospel to the people of Ireland, and strength to suffer insult from unbelievers, reproaches from others when I went abroad, and many persecutions, including being put in chains. I am ready to spend my life and energy for the benefit of others, and should I be worthy, to even give up my life without hesitation and most gladly for my Lord. It is here among the people of Ireland that I wish to spend my life until I die, if the Lord grant me this grace.

Book of Kells
illuminated manuscript
of the four Gospels
Ireland 8th-9th century



A great harvest in Ireland

I am very much God's debtor, because he gave me such abundant grace that many people were reborn in God through me, and afterwards confirmed, and clergy were ordained for them. The masses lately come to belief, whom the Lord drew from the ends of the earth, just as he once promised through his prophets: "To you shall the nations come from the ends of the earth, and shall say, 'Our fathers have inherited nothing but lies, worthless things in which there is no profit'" (Jeremiah 16:19). Again, "I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles that you may bring salvation to the uttermost ends of the earth" (Acts 13:47). There I wish to wait for his promise which will surely be fulfilled as the Gospel states, "They shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob," as we believe the faithful will come from all the world.

For that reason one ought to fish well and diligently, just as the Lord has taught, saying, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men," and again through the prophets: "Behold, I am sending forth many fishers and hunters, says the Lord" (Jeremiah 16:16). Christ compels us to spread our nets, so that a vast multitude who are hungry and ready might be caught for God, and be baptized and taught by the clergy, just as the Lord says in the Gospel, "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; and lo, I am with you always to the end of time" (Matthew 28:19). Again he says, "Go forth into the world and preach the Gospel to all creation. He who believes and is baptized shall be saved; but he who does not believe shall be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16). And again, "This Gospel of the kingdom shall be preached throughout the whole world as a witness to all nations; and then the end of the world shall come" (Matthew 24:14). Likewise the Lord foretells through the prophet, "And it shall come to pass in the last days (says the Lord) that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams; yes, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy" (Joel 2:28-29). In Hosea he says: "Those who are not my people I will call my people, and those not beloved I will call my beloved, and in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'Sons of the living God'" (Romans 9:25-26; Hosea 2:23, 1:10).

How did it come to pass in Ireland that those who never had a knowledge of God, but until now always worshiped idols and impure things, have now been made sons of God and a people of the Lord, and that even sons and daughters of Irish chieftans are seen to be monks and virgins of Christ?

Among others, a blessed Irishwoman of noble birth, beautiful and full-grown, whom I had baptized, came to us and told us that she had received a prophecy from a divine messenger, who advised her to be a virgin of Christ and draw near to God. Thanks be to God, on the sixth day after this she most laudably and eagerly chose what all virgins of Christ do. Not that their fathers agree with them: no, they often suffer persecution and undeserved reproaches from their parents; and yet their number is ever increasing. How many have been reborn there so as to be of our kind, I do not know, not to mention widows and those who practice continence. But those women who live in slavery suffer the most, due to threats and harassment. But the Lord gave his grace to many of his handmaidens; for, though they are forbidden to do so, they follow him bravely.



A life-long mission to Ireland

If I should wish to separate myself from them and go to Britain, how I would love to go to my own country and my parents, and even as far as Gaul in order to visit the brethren there and see the face of the saints of my Lord! God knows how much I desired it, but I am bound by the Spirit, who gives evidence against me if I do this, telling me that I shall be guilty, and I am afraid of losing the labor which I have begun. For it was not I but Christ the Lord who commanded me to come here and stay with them for the rest of my life. And if the Lord wills, he shall shield me from every evil so that I may not sin before him.

I do believe I have chosen the right course. But I do not trust myself as long as I am in this mortal body, because the strong one, the devil, daily strives to turn me away from the faith and the purity of true religion to which I have devoted myself to the end of my life, to Christ my Lord. The flesh which is hostile to God also seeks to drag us into sinful desires that lead to spiritual death. I know that in part I did not lead a perfect life as did the other faithful; but I confess to my Lord, and do not blush in his sight, because I do not lie. From the time I came to know him in my youth, the love of God and the fear of him have grown in me, and up to now, thanks to the grace of God, I have kept the faith.

Some may laugh and scorn at this, but I shall not be silent, nor will I hide the signs and wonders which the Lord has shown me many years before they came to pass, as he knows everything even before the beginning of time.

I refused gifts and payments for my service

Many have tried to thwart my mission in Ireland. They have spoken behind my back saying, “Why does this fellow throw himself into danger among enemies who have no knowledge of God?” I don’t think it was malice on their part, but it simply did not appeal to them to expose themselves to this kind of rigorous life and danger. I was more use to it due to my rustic upbringing. But I was not quick to recognize the grace God had given me, otherwise I would have followed him earlier than I did.

You know, as God does, how I lived among you from my youth with sincerity and faith. And even among the heathens I have been honest and trustworthy. Whenever any of you gave me gifts, including gifts left at the altar from holy celibate women, I returned them if at all possible, even though this caused you some offense.

When I baptized thousands of people, I did not receive any favors or payment. In fact it cost me dearly and exposed me to many dangers for your sake. I ordained clergy without payment as well. I did all this by the grace of God, with love and joy for your salvation.

When I met with kings I gave them presents, as customary, and I financially supported those who traveled with me in my ministry. On one occasion, when my traveling band and I were robbed and put in chains, the Lord delivered us on the fourteenth day, and restored what we had lost.

I do not seek honor from others because the Lord himself is enough for me. Although I am most unworthy, the Lord has exalted me beyond measure. I prefer poverty and failure rather than a life of wealth and pleasure. After all, Christ the Lord himself was poor for our sakes. I fear nothing, not even betrayal, slavery, or murder, because of the promises of heaven. I am in the Lord’s hands, as Scripture says: “Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you.”

One of the least of his servants

I commend my soul to God who is most faithful. For he is no respecter of persons, since he has chosen me for this obscure mission that I might be one of the least of his servants. I give to God what he has given to me, because I can do nothing unless he has granted it to me. I am ready to drink his chalice, just as he has offered it to others who have loved him.



May I never be separated from this people whom God has redeemed in this remote land, and may God give me perseverance to remain a faithful witness to him to the end of my days.

If I have done any good for the sake of my God whom I love, I pray that he may allow me the opportunity to shed my blood for his name’s sake, even if my body should be torn limb from limb by dogs or savage beasts, devoured by birds, or left unburied. On the last day we shall rise again in the brightness of the sun, that is, in the glory of Christ Jesus our Redeemer, as sons of the living God and co-heirs with Christ, made in his image; for we shall reign

through him, with him, and for him.

Each day we see the sun rise at God's command, but its splendor will not last for ever. Those who worship the sun will perish. We who believe in Christ and worship him, the true sun, will never die. For those who do the will of Christ will be with him forever, who reigns with the Father Almighty and with the Holy Spirit both now and forever. Amen.

I testify in truthfulness and joy before God and his holy angels that I never had any reason, except the Gospel and its promises, to ever return to that nation from which I had previously escaped with difficulty.

I pray that those who believe in God and who read this confession, which I, Patrick, an unlearned sinner have written in Ireland, may recognize that whatever I achieved or taught that was pleasing to God, was done so by the gift of God. This is my confession before I die.

[Patrick was born a Briton around 387 AD in the latter days of the Roman occupation near the end of the fourth century. We do not know the location of the village he grew up in, but it likely lay near the West coast of Britain. Patrick wrote his autobiographical confession in Latin around the year 450 AD. Several early manuscript copies still exist, the oldest dating back to 807 AD by the Irish scribe called Ferdomnagh. Another shorter writing by Patrick, called the *Letter to Coroticus*, still survives today. Patrick wrote this letter to the soldiers of King Coroticus to chastize them for capturing Christians of Patrick's flock as slaves. Both writings provide us a window into the soul of this great missionary bishop who brought thousands to faith in Jesus Christ.]

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Song of Patrick

lyrics and music by Ed Conlin

Click  to listen to an MP3 [audio clip](#)

Lyrics to *Song of Patrick*

This day God gives me, strength of high heaven
Sun and moon shining, flame in my hearth.
Flashing of lightning, wind in its swiftness,
Depths of the ocean, firmness of earth.

Refrain

*Rising I thank You, mighty and strong One,
King of creation, giver of rest.
Light of the morning, dispersing the darkness,
Your love awaking the dawn.*

This day God sends me, strength as my steersman,
Might to uphold me, Wisdom as guide.
Your eyes are watchful, your ears are listening,
Your lips are speaking, Strength at my side.

God's way is my way, God's shield is round me,
God's host defends me, Saving from ill.
Angels of heaven, drive from me always,
All that would harm me, Stand by me still

Final refrain

*Rising I thank You, Mighty and strong One,
King of creation, Giver of rest.
Firmly confessing Oneness of Godhead
Threeness of Persons, Trinity blest.*

[The *Song of Patrick* is included in a Music CD entitled, *Sing a New Song to the Lord*, produced by The Servants of the Word, and distributed by [Tabor House](#).]

Background to the original hymn attributed to St. Patrick

The *Song of Patrick* is based on an early Celtic hymn called *St. Patrick's Breastplate* or [The Deer's Cry](#). [For a contemporary English version of the song, see translation by [Kuno Meyer](#).] This hymn, which dates from the late seventh or early eighth century, is traditionally ascribed to St. Patrick. It reflects many of the themes found in Patrick's thought.

It is believed that Patrick wrote this hymn as a breastplate of faith for the protection of body and soul against all forms of evil – devils, vice, and the evil which humans perpetrate against one another. Legend has it that the High King of Tara, Loeguire, on Holy Saturday 433 AD, resolved to ambush and kill Patrick and his monks to prevent them from spreading the Christian faith in his kingdom. As Patrick and his followers approached singing this hymn, the king and his men saw only a herd of wild deer and let them pass by. This hymn is both a prayer and statement of faith to be recited for protection, arming oneself for spiritual battle.

Ed Conlin is a member of the [Servants of the Word](#), a missionary brotherhood of men living single for the Lord. He lives in community in the inner city of Detroit, Michigan, USA, and works as a licensed substance abuse counselor and chaplain with the Capuchin Franciscan Ministries in Detroit.

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Saints or Sinners?

by Jerry Bridges

I am sometimes asked, “As Christians, should we view ourselves as saints or sinners?” My answer is, both. We are simultaneously saints and sinners. The apostle Paul often referred to believers as saints (Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1), and we really are. We are saints not only in our standing before God but in our essential persons as well.

We really are new creations in Christ. A real, fundamental change has occurred in the depths of our beings. The Holy Spirit has come to dwell within us, and we have been freed from the dominion of sin. But despite this we still sin every day, many times a day. And in that sense we are sinners.

We should always view ourselves both in terms of what we are in Christ, that is, saints, and what we are in ourselves, namely, sinners. To help us understand this twofold view of ourselves, consider Jesus as an analogy. In His own person He was sinless, but as our representative He assumed our guilt. However, He never had any of the personal feelings associated with guilt. He was fully conscious of His own sinlessness even when bearing our sins and the curse of our sins in our place. In like manner, while we should always rejoice in the righteousness we have in Christ, we should never cease to feel deeply our own sinfulness and consequent unworthiness.

In other words, just as Christ could maintain a separate sense of his personal sinlessness and His official bearing of our sin, so we must distinguish between the righteousness we have in Him and the sinfulness we see in ourselves.

[Excerpt from *The Discipline of Grace: God's Role and Our Role in the Pursuit of Holiness*, (c) 1994, 2006 Jerry Bridges, NavPress, Colorado Springs, Colorado.]

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The Discipline of Confessing Our Sins

by Richard Foster

"The confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works."
- Augustine of Hippo

At the heart of God is the desire to give and to forgive. Because of this, He set into motion the entire redemptive process that culminated in the cross and was confirmed in the resurrection. The usual notion of what Jesus did on the cross runs something like this: people were so bad and so mean and God was so angry with them that He could not forgive them unless somebody big enough took the rap for the whole lot of them.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Love, not anger, brought Jesus to the cross. Golgotha came as a result of God's great desire to forgive, not His reluctance. Jesus knew that by His vicarious suffering He could actually absorb all the evil of humanity and so heal it, forgive it, redeem it.

This is why Jesus refused the customary painkiller when it was offered him. He wanted to be completely alert for this greatest work of redemption. In a deep and mysterious way He was preparing to take on the collective sin of the human race. Since Jesus lives in the eternal now, this work was not just for those around Him, but He took in all the violence, all the fear, all the sin of all the past, all the present and all the future. This was His highest and most holy work, the work that makes confession and the forgiveness of sins possible.

Some seem to think that when Jesus shouted ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ It was a moment of weakness (Mark 15:34). ‘Not at all’. *This was a moment of greatest triumph.* Jesus, who had walk in constant communion with the father, now became so totally identified with humankind that He was the actual embodiment of sin. As Paul writes, ‘He made him to be sin who knew no sin’ (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus succeeded in taking into Himself all the dark powers of this present evil age and defeated every one of them by the light of his presence. He accomplished such a total identification with the sin of the race that He experienced the abandonment of God. Only in that way could He redeem sin. It was indeed his moment of greatest triumph.

Having accomplished this greatest of all his works, Jesus then took refreshment. ‘It is finished’, He announced. That is, this great work of redemption was completed. He could feel the last dregs of the misery of humankind flow through Him and into the care of the Father. The last twinges of evil, hostility, anger and fear drained out of Him, and He was able to turn again into the light of God’s presence. ‘It is finished’. Soon after, he was free to give up his spirit to the Father.

To shame our sins He blushed in blood;
He closed His eyes to show us God;
Let all the world fall down and know
That none but God such love can sow.

- Bernard of Clairvaux

This redemptive process is a great mystery hidden in the heart of God. But I know that it is true. I know this not only because the Bible says it is true, but because I have seen its effects in the lives of many people, including myself. It is the ground upon which we can know that confession and forgiveness are realities that transform us. Without the cross the Discipline of confession would be only psychologically therapeutic. But it is so much more. It involves an objective change in us. It is a means of healing and transforming the inner spirit.

‘But I thought that Christ on the cross and redemption deals with salvation,’ you may say. It does. But salvation as the Bible speaks of it refers to far more than who comes to faith in Christ or who gets to heaven. The Bible views salvation as both an event and a process. To converted people Paul says, ‘Work out your salvation with fear and trembling’ (Philippians 2:12). In a sermon titled, ‘The necessity of Christians coming into more of the forgiving grace of God. The discipline of confession helps the believer to grow into ‘mature, attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ’ (Ephesians 4:13).

‘But isn’t confession a grace instead of a discipline’? It is both. Unless God gives the grace, no genuine confession can be made. But it is also a discipline because there are things we must do. It is a consciously chosen course of action that brings us under the shadow of the Almighty.

How is it that confession is listed under the corporate discipline? ..We are grateful for the biblical

teaching.. that ‘there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus’ (1 Timothy 2:5). We are also grateful for the biblical teaching, newly appreciated in our day, ‘confess your sins to each other and pray for each other ...’ (James 5:16). Both are found in scripture and neither need exclude the other.

Confession is a difficult discipline for us because we all too often view the believing community as a fellowship of saints before we see it as a fellowship of sinners. We feel that everyone else has advanced so far into holiness that we are isolated and alone in our sin. We cannot bear to reveal our failures and shortcomings to others. We imagine that we are the only ones who have not stepped on to the high road to heaven. Therefore, we hide ourselves from one another and live in veiled lies and hypocrisy.

But if we know that the people of God are first a fellowship of sinners, we are freed to hear the unconditional call of God’s love and to confess our needs openly before our brothers and sisters. We know we are not alone in our sin. In acts of mutual confession we release the power that heals. Our humanity is no longer denied, but transformed.

[Excerpt from *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, (c) 1980, 1989 Richard J. Foster, Hodder & Stoughtonm London.]

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The Danger of “I’d Never Do That”

by Sam Williamson

I used to work for a company that created software for publishers. It handled mail orders that were accompanied by checks, cash, or credit card information.

We had a balancing tool that ensured all the money that came into the mailroom was entered into the system and deposited in the bank. It protected against embezzlement.

In 1988 we installed the software at a large Christian publisher. When management heard of our checks and balances, they were appalled. They felt it questioned the integrity of their employees. They asked us to turn off the balancing feature.

A year later, a timid, gray-haired, rooster-pecked grandmother—a long-term employee of the publisher—stole fifteen thousand dollars.

Afterward I asked her, “Why?” She shyly stammered, “It was so easy. The money was just sitting there. It was just so darn easy.” She added,

“I’d heard of embezzlers before. I always said, *‘I’d never do that.’* And then I did.”

Her simple path to self-destruction

This simple grandmother's self-identity of "I'd never do that," led to a false self-confidence, but when external constraints were removed ("It was so easy") she became a thief. Her self-pretense allowed a weed of greed to grow in her heart.

How many weeds grow in our hearts, secretly nourished in the soil of "I'd never do that"? How many of us secretly think, "But I'd never ... use drugs, be unfaithful, cheat on my taxes, molest a child, or resort to violence"?

We see others divorce or commit adultery, or perhaps they betray us. We say, "I'd never do that," but can we be so sure? If we had *their* parents, *their* lives, *their* temptations—and if we had **their** restraints removed—do we honestly know what we'd do?

If God removed those same restraints in our lives, might we do the very same thing? Or maybe something completely different but equally harmful or worse?

What if...

What do we mean when we say, "I'd never do that"? Do we mean, "I *would* never do that," or "I *could* never do that"? I think we tell ourselves, "I *would* never..." when what we really mean is, "I *could* never..."

But what if we could? What if God, for one sliver of time, looked away, and if we knew, for one sliver of concealment, no one—not even God—would ever find out?

This is actually the terror of the Ring of Power (in The Lord Of The Rings). If given unlimited power—if every restraint was removed—we might not do the evil Sauron does, but we might do something else equally evil. If given the Ring of Power:

- Galadriel would become "Great and terrible ... All shall love me and despair."
- Boromir would save his people from Sauron by becoming an evil substitute.
- In the end even Frodo yields. He is saved by an external force—Gollum's teeth.

God's grace in rules and restraints

Restraints (such as accountability groups like Covenant Eyes, peer-pressure, or will-power) temporarily save us from destructive behavior. We agree to them in moments of clarity to strengthen us in moments of confusion.

Restraints are like training wheels. They keep us upright as we develop an inner poise. But in a moment of mechanical failure, the wheels may fall off and we crash.

How dare we disparage our friends when their training wheels break! They may actually have more inner poise at this moment than we do (just not enough). It is God's grace—not our personal greatness—that keeps us from falling.

Do we shoot ourselves up with self-euphoric heroin when we claim, "I'd never do that"?

The danger of rules and restraints

Moralism is not the proliferation of rules and restraints; they are simply symptoms. Moralism is the self-assurance based on right behavior arising from external restraints.

God desires a changed heart not training wheels for our training wheels. When we rest our hearts on our restrained behavior, we are in a moment of grave danger. A time will come—and it will!—when external restraints disappear or our will-power is exhausted.

What will we do then?

If our heart rests on *“I’d never do that,”* we will fall. And great will be that fall. If our hearts rest on *“There but for the grace of God go I,”* (found in God-given restraints and God-formed inner-poise) we will ride upright in freedom. And great will be that ride.

We need a strengthened heart

God wants inner strength of heart, not just external restraints. He says, “Do not be like the horse or the mule ... held in check by bit and bridle” (Psalm 32:9).

Let’s find almost any restraint that keeps us from trampling on each other. But those bits and bridles are training tools to teach us to rely on God’s grace, to guide us as our hearts are reshaped with his desires. Someday the bits and bridles are coming off.

Retrained behavior is good; a spirit-changed heart is better. Only God himself can strengthen our hearts; not rules or restraints, only a relationship.

Holding on to God

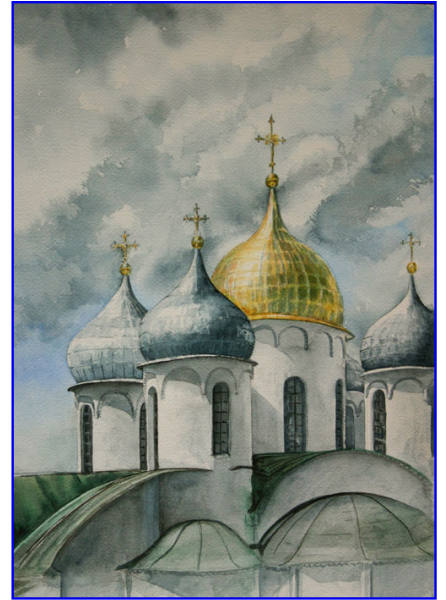
I haven’t spoken to the woman who embezzled since that interview twenty-five years ago. I don’t know where she is or what she is doing or even if she is still alive. But I’ll always remember how she concluded our discussion.

“Sam,” she said, “I used to go church because I thought, ‘I’d never do that.’ Now I’m holding on to God for dear life, because I know I might.”

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Sam Williamson grew up in Detroit, Michigan, USA. He is the son of a Presbyterian pastor and grandson of missionaries to China. He moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1975. He worked in London England from 1979 to 1982, helping to establish [Antioch](#), a member community of the Sword of the Spirit. After about twenty-five years as an executive at a software company in Ann Arbor he sensed God call him to something new. He left the software company in 2008 and now speaks at men’s retreats, churches, and campus outreaches. He is married to Carla Williamson and they have four grown children and a grandson. He has a blog site, www.beliefsoftheheart.com, and can be reached at Sam@BeliefsoftheHeart.com.





Spring Forward - an Artist's Sampler

Watercolors by Ros Yates

[click each image above to enlarge and view description](#)

Ros Yates is a member of the Antioch ecumenical Christian community in London. She has been painting and drawing from an early age. Having studied Biology and Theology she is now an ordained Deacon in the Church of England, a self-taught artist, and mother of four children. Not surprising then that themes of creativity, spirituality and the natural world are constantly interwoven in her life and art.

She uses art and crafts in prayer and Bible study workshops with adults and children. The natural world is a constant course of inspiration. She loves gardening and spending time at The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in London, the London Wetland Centre, and holidays in Purbeck on the English South Coast. All these find their way into her art, as do the word-images and parables of the Bible.

Go to > [Next Page](#) [[image 1](#)] [[image 2](#)] [[image 3](#)] [[introduction](#)]

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Spring Forward - an Artist's Sampler by Ros Yates



Title: Irises May 2012
Medium: Wax resist and watercolour

These irises were picked from the garden in our holiday home. I wanted to celebrate the joy they had brought me and my sister, recently diagnosed with cancer – (I sent her another painting of the same flowers).

At the time I was also preparing for Art Workshops at the 2012 'On Holiday' Sword of the Spirit gathering in Belgium. This painting was a demonstration piece. I called the workshops 'Praying and Playing with Paint'. The idea was for people who are not used to painting to have a go, but to be freed up from the need to make their painting look exactly like the object that inspired it. This 'I can't draw'

syndrome often holds people back from delving into art. The painting is made by starting with a blank piece of white paper and spending some time just looking at the vase of flowers (or whatever). Then take a white wax candle and, pressing hard, just scribble shapes inspired by the flowers. You can't see what you are doing – but that's the whole point! – there need be no fear of making mistakes – there are no mistakes, just a creative flow.

Then with a big brush and a lot of water, you wet the whole paper and let it soak in. Only then do you add splashes of wet colour, more or less where the flowers are – or not! The 'wet in wet' technique is a wild and unpredictable affair – just like a lot of life! The paint flows in different directions and creates some beautiful effects, and the white wax lines show through. It can take several minutes to watch and see what the paint will do and even longer to see how it will look when dry. During the workshops we painted pictures inspired by the leaves and pine cones of the forest in which we were staying at De Vossemeren CenterParcs. We talked about how these paintings are like our lives – we are often fearful of making our mark, of making mistakes, spoiling the white paper. But when we go for it beautiful things can happen. It may not turn out how we intended, and might even look a mess – but our Creator God treasures what we offer and redeems our mistakes.

Personally this is a challenge to me – I do love attention to detail and often my paintings aim at being very accurate to life, so this kind of 'playing with paint' is quite freeing once I have a go and not worry about the cost of paper!

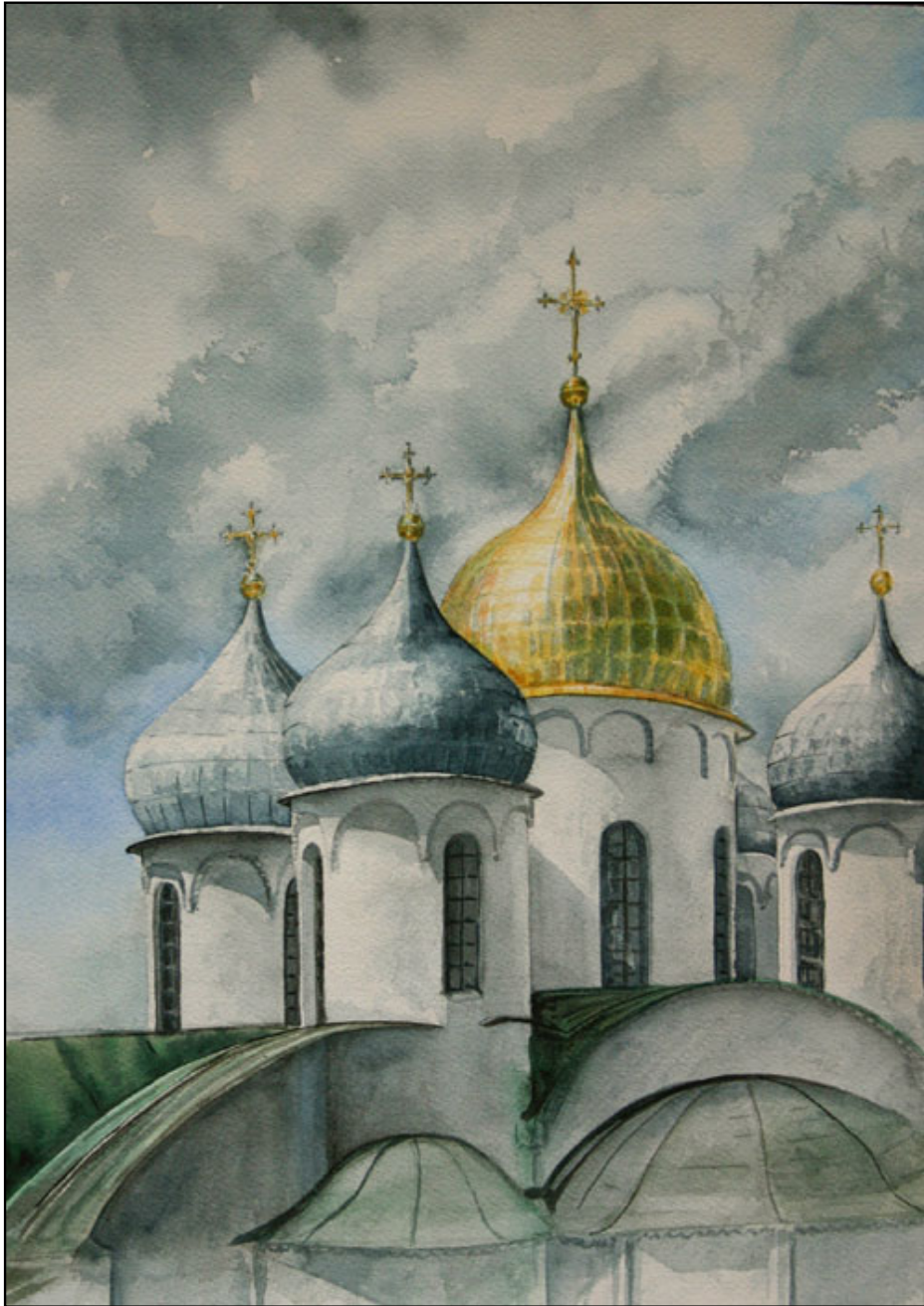
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Spring Forward - an Artist's Sampler by Ros Yates



Title: St Sophia, Greater Novgorod, Russia

Medium: watercolour

Size: 40 x 30 cm (approx)

Our family lived in Moscow, Russia for 3 years 2005-8, and one of the delights for me as an artist was the ancient church architecture. Much has been destroyed in the Communist years, but what remains is still wonderful and many have been recently restored. We visited Greater Novgorod, an ancient

capital of Russia in the North West of the country, on a lovely day of sunshine and showers and the light on the domes of the cathedral looking across from the belltower was beautiful. Every historic city has a 'Kremlin', a walled, fortified centre. And there is always a church, cathedral or several of them inside the walls. They are a reminder of the heavenly city. The gold of the dome is hundreds of years old yet still untarnished. One of the challenges I set myself was to learn how to paint reflections in gold domes – it takes a lot of careful observation of what is really there. Whilst painting another church in Moscow I was struck by how the gold domes reflect the busy life and pain of the city streets below but transforming and lifting them up into the reflection of the heavens above.



Smolenskaya Church, Moscow (detail)

Every aspect of the architecture in a Russian Orthodox church is symbolic, the domes pointing to heaven, the number and arrangement of dome, the shape of the groundplan etc. I spent a lot of time photographing Russian churches and still would like to spend more time painting them.

Go to > [Next Page](#) [[image 1](#)] [[image 2](#)] [[image 3](#)] [[introduction](#)]

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Spring Forward - an Artist's Sampler by Ros Yates



Title: Otters, London Wetland Centre Sept 2012
Medium; watercolour
Size: 30 x 40 cm (approx)



Title; Lapwings, London Wetland Centre October 2013

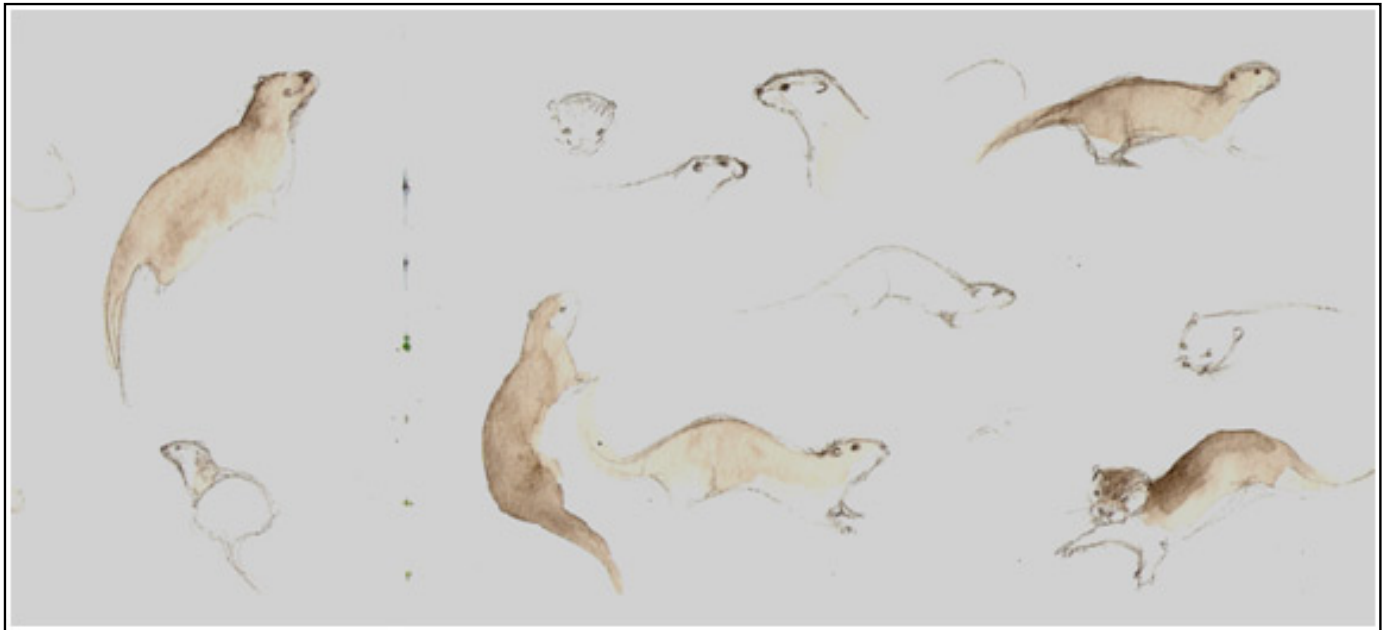
Medium: watercolour

Size: 40 x 40 cm

I try to escape from the London city noise and busy-ness and regularly go to the London Wetland Centre, an area of lakes and reedbeds and woodland in the loop of the River Thames, it is an oasis in the urban sprawl. The Wildfowl and Wetland Trust (WWT) has converted some old reservoirs and gravel pits into a haven for wildlife in the city.

It is also an educational centre and these otters are in an enclosure where you can watch them freely. (Wild otters are endangered in the UK) They are just delightful and I had to spend a while sketching them and put the painting together at home from sketches and photographs. Moving so fast, a sketch can mean as little as a curved line on the page, suggesting the arch of the back and tail. It is a real challenge to make them look as alert and lively as they really are. The Lapwings are a wading bird also often seen on British farmland. At least they sometimes stand still for a few seconds, unlike the otters. Peering down a telescope in a bird hide, I tried to capture their shapes and patterns so I could do the painting later. Photographs are useful for confirming details, but a photograph is a moment

captured in the life of the subject. Life is so much more. I'm not sure I have succeeded, but my aim is to show the 'life' in the 'wildlife' and their environment. They are God's gift to us, entrusted to us to care for and manage well for future generations.



Otter sketches, London Wetland Centre

Return to > [introduction](#) [[image 1](#)] [[image 2](#)] [[image 3](#)]

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[February/March 2014 - Vol. 72](#)

An Interview with Author Michael Shaughnessy

Look inside > to read an [excerpt](#)

The Red Madonna

published November 2013

392 pages

Available in [Kindle ebook](#) and [paperback](#)

LB: When did you start writing creatively? Do you know why?

Mike: I started in my mid-thirties. I didn't really like writing, I just had a good idea for a book one day – I should probably say an inspiration, because I think that was what it was. The idea came as a reflected on the line from the song: *O Sacred Head Surrounded*. The specific line was: "*And angel hosts adored thee and trembled as they gazed.*" The first question was simply, why did they tremble. That led to the second, which was, how do emotions work for angels? And that resulted in the basic idea of the book: Doing an interview with Michael the Archangel. Over the next ten years I would get ideas for chapters and find myself writing bits and pieces here and there on a day off or during a vacation. Then when I heard the testimony of a young woman one day, I knew the rest of the story and voilà, ten years later I finished *The Archangel of Westminster*.

LB: And another ten years went by and you finally finished novel number two...

Mike: Well, not exactly. I started writing *The Red Madonna* before I finished *The Archangel of Westminster*. I had another idea and just got stuck in it, but you are right. It took ten years to write it, after all, I do it in my spare time.

LB: Tell us a little about *The Red Madonna*, where did the idea originate for that book?

Mike: From Tom Clancy, sort of... He wrote a series of books about a character, Jack Ryan, who ends up being the President of the USA. So I thought it might be fun to have a character, Fr. Michael Reilly, who goes from being a parish priest to, well, I don't know how far up he goes, but in book two, let's just note that he is already in

Rome.

LB: OK, tell us a little about the plot of *The Red Madonna* – but no spoilers, please!

Mike: There are twelve primary characters in the book. The book introduces four of them in their own settings in the first four chapters. Gradually, their lives and the lives of the others get intertwined. Each of the characters is tested around his or her response to a sexual abuse case: the priest, the Archbishop, the lawyers on either side, the victim, the woman pushing him to act, her husband, the two detectives, the parents of the victim and one other person. Then the plot gets augmented through murder and sacrilege to a completely different level. I actually think the character studies are more fascinating than the plot.

LB: Why?

Mike: Because they are real people: afraid, confused, deceived, moral in their own way, funny, stubborn, kind, clever, manipulative, and their lives unfold as you read.

LB: And the next book?

Mike: I started that in 2004.

LB: So will it be coming out soon?

Mike: Maybe, if I have time to write.

LB: It's a sequel?

Mike: Yes, I thought it would just follow the main character of the first book, but last week at least four of the original characters butted their way into the second book! In addition, as I wrote I suddenly found that the last line of the first book had a whole different meaning. I expected it was just the end of the book. Suddenly it was shaping the whole plot of the second.

LB: Is that how your writing works? Don't you know where this is all going?

Mike: Not exactly. I was as just about surprised by how the first book ended as the readers are. I thought I had finished the book, then, as I was proof reading, one of the characters re-wrote his role right at the end.

LB: So how about a few teasers for book two? Do you have a working title?

Mike: Yes, or maybe just a concept. A color will be in the title again. A hue of red? Maybe crimson or cardinal? But there is a very strong chess theme playing in the background as well. So maybe black or white.

LB: And the plot?

Mike: An extraordinary set of miracles is intertwined with a conclave to elect a new pope that has somehow gone awry. Season that with a bit of Shakespeare, Faust, chess, and the Book of Revelation and we will see where it goes. I hope Fr. Michael Reilly knows, because I don't!

LB: One last question: Why do you write novels?

Mike: One answer would be that I enjoy the story as much as the readers do, I just happen to get it first. A more serious answer would be because I think the Lord is calling the [Sword of the Spirit](#) to be contributors to and shapers of a new culture. I think the Lord wants to use the next generation especially to write the songs, the comic books, the novels, the screenplays, and everything else that shapes a culture of life, truth, joy, hope and holiness. If we believe what we pray, "thy kingdom come on earth..." then we should be involved in building that kingdom.

> To order an ebook

The Red Madonna: <http://bit.ly/redmadonna>

The Archangel of Westminster: <http://amzn.to/1bDcOil>

(You may need to download Amazon's free e-reader application)

> To order a paperback

The Red Madonna: <http://bit.ly/TheRedMadonna>

The Archangel of Westminster: <http://bit.ly/1bpxBel>

About the author

I am originally from Minnesota and know how to dress in -40 degree temperatures. I have been doing Christian youth-work since I was 19 and was one of the first Catholics to work as Area Director for Young Life. I write a monthly newsletter on youth culture and am the International Director of Kairos, a Christian youth program serving those 13 to 30.

I met Pope John Paul II in 1981 during a conference I organized for 60 leaders in the Charismatic renewal, five days before he was shot. I met Yasser Arafat, the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Patriarchs of Jerusalem and one of the Chief Rabbis of Jerusalem during the visit of John Paul II to Israel.

I lived for 15 years in Belfast N.Ireland and London, England, which was where I wrote *The Archangel of Westminster*. I began writing *The Red Madonna* in 1998 and had more or less finished it by 2002. I began the follow-up novel, currently titled, *The Cardinal Conspiracy* in 2003, and hope to finish it before the next conclave.

I am also the author of *A Concise Catholic Catechism*, a contributor to [How to be Ecumenical Today](#), and the creator of *iPray* -- an aid to daily prayer.

I am an Elder (leader) of the [Servants of the Word](#), an ecumenical brotherhood of men who live the vows of celibacy, simplicity and obedience. I have visited 26 countries and speak German fluently. I travel about 10 days of the month. My pillow lives in Lansing, Michigan.

My vices are golf, pistachios, chocolate and single malt scotch. Someday I will repent of them.



The Archangel of Westminster

by Michael Shaughnessy

[Kindle ebook](#) format

It was Holy Week, the week set apart by Christians to commemorate Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. It was the week Michael intended to visit London for his tour but little did he know, it was intended to be a time for an interview with the warrior who holds the highest rank among the army of heaven - St. Michael the Archangel.

On that Holy Week, Kate decides to die. Michael witnessed the heavenly hosts engaged in an intense spiritual battle for her soul. Through that sobering event, Michael understood how the story of each person is connected to familiar stories he knew - the fall of Satan, Jesus being tempted by the devil, the deliverance of the demoniac, Jesus on the cross and Jesus out of the tomb.

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[February/March 2014 - Vol. 72](#)



The Red Madonna (an excerpt)

by Michael Shaughnessy © 2013

Prologue:

The persons in this book are all fictitious.

As of the publishing of this book 34 people in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis have been publicly accused of sex-abuse in the past 50 years.

Sadly, many were guilty and caused untold hurt.

Just as sadly others were accused falsely and had their reputations destroyed or at least very seriously damaged.

Some cases remain open. The day of judgment will reveal the truth – about us all...

> See interview with [author](#)

1

Stef's heart pounded in his neck and his head. His lungs burned from the lack of oxygen. This alley was a bad choice, a dead end. He turned back, the way he came, running like a pursued criminal. He saw a movement out of the corner of his eye just in time. Instantly, he raised his left arm in defense, blocking the pipe intended for his head. He wheeled on his left leg and with his right caught his assailant in the kidney. The man doubled over. He followed up with a kick to the groin and the man sprawled to the ground, groaning.

Now another man charged at him, pulled a switchblade and smiled. Stef's odds took a significant turn for the worse. He took two steps back and prepared for the attack. The man approached, slicing the air with his knife, the smile growing with every thrust of his arm. Stef stepped back further and backed into a wall. His eyes darted – up, down, left, right – looking for a weapon of defense or any route of escape. There was an iron bar three feet above his head, part of a fire escape. It was fixed, useless as a weapon. Stef was trapped. The man smiled again. He waved his knife in small circles as he approached Stef.

Stef made the first move. He leaped as high as he could, caught the iron bar overhead with his hands, and pulled himself up and climbed up onto the fire escape platform. Stef smiled down at his assailant. "New muscles..." He thought.

His assailant looked up at him with a face devoid of all emotion but one – determination – just like so many faces in computer games. "Later..." Stef mumbled, rather incomprehensibly. "I'll fix you later." He even knew how he

would do it, but first he leaped up three stairs on the fire escape.

The man wanted to give chase, but gymnastics just wasn't in his skill set. He looked to his right and saw a garbage can. He tried it and it held his weight. He slipped his knife back into his pocket and reached upward. He could just grab the platform.

Stef leaped back down the three steps and unlatched the ten foot extension of the fire-escape ladder. The extension was like the arm of a clock, hinged and standing at twelve o'clock. Stef rammed the ladder. It swung outward on its hinge and crashed downward. The man jumped, but it was too late. The ladder smashed into his head and knocked him unconscious. "Two down, two to go." Stef climbed down the ladder and ran to the junction of the two alleys.

Two men had gone up the west alley when the original foursome split. When they heard the crash of the ladder, they turned around and headed toward the noise.

Stef jumped from the fire escape and ran. He looked up the west alley and saw them. One of the men pulled a gun. The stakes just went up again. Stef turned and looked down the south alley. He saw streetlights and started to run toward them when suddenly he tripped over – nothing. "That's odd," he thought, "No time to wonder why, I ain't got time to die." He scrambled back to his feet, awed at his own thoughts. "How did that song come to mind?" He ran.

A police siren rang in his ears. It was close-by, but Stef knew about the police in this precinct. Half of them were corrupt and would not be on his side in this fight. How had they been notified? He'd have to think about that afterward, too. He reached the end of the alley, looked quickly both ways and slid to his left along the wall of the building, just as the police car turned into the street. Friend or foe? If friend, he would run toward them and take cover behind their car. If foe, he didn't want to be trapped between them and the two men coming down the south alley, nor did he want to be anywhere near the police when they got out. He had to decide, now! The two men were less than 50 yards away and the police car was speeding up the street. He thought he recognized the face of the driver, but what did the report he had just read say about him? Suddenly he remembered.

Stef pushed off the wall and ran straight into the street. He expected the gunshot as he ran out across the alley. The bullet smashed into the rear window of the police car, which began to skid just as Stef reached the left, front quarter-panel. He leaped and did a hand spring off the car. He flew twelve feet up in the air, the world turning upside-down beneath him.

Before he even landed Stef reached forward and flicked the switch just in front of him. The screen in his helmet went black, the siren died and Stef sat back in his chair. He'd just had the thrill of his life.

A technician from DRIVER Inc. – Development and Research Into Virtual Experience and Reality, Incorporated – approached Stef and removed his virtual reality helmet.

"Why did you quit?"

Stef just shook his head.

DRIVER, Inc. had hired him, a paraplegic with cerebral palsy, to develop software for them that could allow the disabled to do things they would never dream of. In one more week his software would be ready to go.

2

“Uh!” The burst of exhaled breath accompanied an overhand serve just inside the center-line.

The serve was powerful. It was a full force, well-placed stroke. It caught Reilly's opponent off guard because it was unexpected. It is somewhat unorthodox among amateurs to give full force to a second serve when it is game point for your opponent, but Reilly saw Adams come forward to receive a second serve so he gave it all he had instead. A double fault is no way to lose a game, but this time the gamble worked and brought the game to deuce. Reilly set up for his next serve, considering where to place it and the kind of spin it would have. He chose topspin just inside the center-line, but his opponent was ready and returned a well-placed backhand. It was good, but not quite good enough. Reilly had moved in immediately and met the shot at full stretch and beat him with a forehand passing shot down the right sideline. It was now Reilly's advantage and match point.

His next move was again unorthodox. He intentionally faulted on his first serve. A stifled “stupid” came across his lips as he looked at the spot where the ball had hit the net. He closed his eyes and a look of intense resolution came across his face. Adams didn't know what to expect now: a legitimate second serve or another gamble on a hard-hit serve. He stayed back. Reilly bounced the ball hard on the court surface, once, twice. The ball went up and Reilly was at full stretch. Adams backed deeper into his court as he saw Reilly finish his wind-up and start to come through his serve with full force. At the last possible moment Reilly pulled back and took everything off his serve, the force of his stroke coming across the ball right to left. The ball barely cleared the net, skipped low and off to the left and died on the second bounce. Adams never had a chance of making it to the ball. Game, set, match, Reilly.

“I don't believe it.” Bill Adams flustered. “I don't believe it. What kind of juvenile shot was that? This is tennis, not ping-pong. No professional alive would pull that!”

“Sometimes it helps to be a rank amateur.” Michael Reilly smiled just to rub it in.

“I should have guessed it. You were exactly the same at the bar. Legal, unorthodox, maybe even unprofessional.”

“Clever is the word you are looking for.”

Reilly and Adams were about as closely matched in tennis as you can get. They had one of those treasured friendships that allows for full competition without fear of harming the relationship. In the summer, that meant Wednesday afternoon tennis at 4:30.

They shook hands over the net and headed for the showers.

“Anything new at St. Kevin's, Padre?” Attorney Bill Adams asked Fr. Michael Reilly.

“Not much.”

“How long have you been there now?”

“Five years and a lifetime.”

“Just another priest content with life, I see.”

“The only content priests are dead or drunk. I'm neither.”

“Still hanging around with the rich and famous?”

“No more than you.”

“Fifteen love, Reilly.”

“Besides, they're not all rich. There is quite a cross section in Wayzata. Not many Black Americans, not many of the real poor, but a nice cross-section. Certainly better than Edina.” Fr. Reilly stopped them both with his racket, and looked at Bill Adams. “But don't get me wrong, I wouldn't mind being pastor of your church, then I could give you a real penance. I might even get you to live a reasonably Christian life!”

Adams brushed the racket aside, “That's assuming I'd come to you for confession. Do I look that stupid?”

“As they say, looks aren't everything.”

Adams slipped back out of the banter. “The Archbishop seems to like what you've done at St. Kevin's.”

“I think you talk to him more than I do, and I'm the priest.”

“But I'm the lawyer, and today, holy mother the Church needs unholy brother the lawyer as much as she needs loyal son the priest.”

“Unfortunately.”

“I hear the parish income is up.”

“You hear too much.”

“The Archbishop likes telling me the good news when I tell him the bad. He said you paid off the debt on the new parish center five years ahead of schedule.”

“If financial prosperity were the judge of the health of the parish I would be satisfied with how we're doing. It's not. So I'm not.”

“So how does parish health get judged?”

“It depends on who is judging it. Some count baptisms, weddings, and weekly communion averages. Not many count confessions anymore, too many fingers left over after the counting is done.”

“How about you? What do you count?”

“Good question. I'm not sure – maybe the percentage of the youth still coming at seventeen and,” then jabbing his thumb upward, he added, “the percentages of the dead going that way.”

Adams opened the door to the men's locker room for Fr. Reilly. “Good luck trying to figure that out!”

“It is a bit tricky to calculate.”

“Any estimate you can make for me, personally?” Adams asked, rotating a thumbs-down to a thumbs-up as Fr. Reilly passed.

“Well, your soul is in better condition than your tennis, but that's not saying much.”

Mickey O'Reilly crossed the Atlantic in 1980 with his parents. By the time they made it to Minnesota he was simply Michael Reilly, a decision his father, James O'Reilly made on the flight over “the pond”. It took Mickey about three weeks in High School to switch to Mike and start dropping the Irish accent. In 1981 he graduated and went to the University of St. Thomas on a full scholarship because his father coached soccer there. He had briefly considered the priesthood, but decided against it and took pre-law courses finishing with a double major in German and Philosophy. His four years at St. Thomas were followed by a degree from William Mitchell School of Law. He practiced for only thirteen months, during which time he again changed his mind and entered the seminary.

Michael Reilly had been raised in the confused Catholic world of post-Vatican II Northern Ireland. He had learned all the old ways of the Roman Catholic Church from his parents and grandparents, who took fifteen years to make their peace with the sign of peace. Many of the Vatican II changes had a rough time crossing the Irish Sea and foundered on the rocks of Northern Ireland's resurgence of “troubles”. Communion taken in the hand happened in Hollywood movies before it did in St. Theresa's in West Belfast. Communion under both species was not practiced there until the late 1990s. Congregational singing has blasted off a couple of times, but has never reached orbit.

Reilly was confused further by attending St. Thomas University and tasting its eclectic mix of theologies, spiritualities and practices. Ultimately, he was ordained with twenty-seven others in 1991. Of these twenty-seven, only twenty were still functioning as priests. They had been ill-prepared for what they would face. Some fell victim to the new sexual morality. They were guinea pigs for a new approach in the seminary that went miserably wrong. However, something unusual happened in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis the year after Fr. Reilly was ordained. The newly appointed Archbishop, the Rt. Reverend Thomas Johnson instituted several tests for men studying for ordination that proved very worthwhile. The diocese quickly dropped in the number of ordinations but rose in quality.

3

For Jim Smith it had been a frustrating day – yet another argument with his wife, Adelia Morton. It also had been a long day. He had been out of his slightly claustrophobic office only to give his mid-morning, summer term lecture. The rest of the day was spent in front of his computer doing linguistic analysis. He had expected to see certain similarities in the two pieces of classical Greek literature he was comparing, but after three hours of running them through various tests he had no useful evidence to support his theory. He looked at his watch. It was four-thirty. Enough was enough; he decided to take a coffee break. One thing the University of Minnesota did have was free coffee for its professors. The pay was OK. The office was smaller and less well-appointed than he would have had if he had chosen for a business career instead of an academic one.

He returned to his office with his cup of coffee and sat down at his desk. On his computer he clicked on the icon for Scrabble.

“It's strange that a linguist can learn something from this computer game,” he rationalized as he clicked on the ninth button, selecting the most difficult level. He noted his abilities to himself. He almost always won when the timer was set for anything above five minutes. He was on eight wins in a row at three minutes. Every reduction in the time allowed per word made the game harder. The computer could check its entire dictionary in thirty seconds. It could compare all possible words to the positions available on the board incredibly fast. “Two more wins and I'll drop down to one minute.”

He gave the first word to the computer, an automatic, double-word square. The computer got the letters “n-d-b-u-n-o” and a blank. Very quickly it coughed up “inbound” and Jim was down 74-0 due to the 50-point bonus for using all seven letters and a double letter score on the “b”. It was a bad start, especially when his letters were “a-a-i-e-r-k-n”. He spelled “rank”, putting the “k” and the “a” on double letter squares. He had 14.

The computer responded with “idiotic” – ten points, but on two double-word squares for 40 points. It was 114 to 14. Jim now faced “a-a-i-e-r-n-s”, all one-point letters. He managed to put the word “raise” alongside the “i” and “d” from “idiotic” and got 15.

The computer put “vampish” across Jim's “a” and on a double-word square and led by 129. Jim got “e-e-e-a-a-i-r”, again all one-point letters. He put “ea” above the “s” from “vampish” and added his “e” below it. The triple-word and double-letter squares made “ease” worth 15 points. He had 44 points.

The computer put “qu” above the “i” of inbound and added “re” below it. The “q” was on a triple-letter square. “quire” was worth 37. Jim got back into the game by transforming “n-m-a-r-v-e” and a blank into “everyman”. He put it on a triple-word square and got 86 for it.

The computer responded by putting “helper” on a triple-word square with the “p” added to the front of “raise” to make “praise.” That scored 41. Jim put “flinged” on a double-word square, but it also made “ease” into “easel” and “rank” into frank. It was worth 91. Jim took a deep breath. He was back in the game: 227-223.

The computer placed its letters quickly. “Cloning” was on a double-word square for 20. Jim barely had looked at his tiles: “c-b-d-e-f-a-g”. He started arranging them and looking at the board. Then it struck him. He had the letters a-b-c-d-e-f-g. He wondered how often that happened. It was the first time he'd had those letters, at least as far as he knew. He began to think about how to calculate the odds of this occurring. There were 100 letter tiles in Scrabble. Twelve were the letter “e”. That meant there was an 84% chance of having an “e” among your first seven tiles. There were nine “a” tiles. Multiplying 63% times 84% gave a 53% chance of having those two letters, but with only two “b”, “c” and “f” tiles, the odds came way down.

The distraction cost him nearly two minutes before he realized what had happened. He focused on the board and knew he had to cover the triple-word square below the “n” in “cloning”, but he couldn't see a way to do it. His time nearly ran out when he put “ac” above “quire” and added the “d” after for 21.

The computer put “waxier” on a triple-word square. With “we” and “ad” it scored 56. The 22 Jim received from “mowed” on a double-word square left him 47 behind.

The computer flashed through the words it was considering. Its speed was a big advantage, but its lack of wisdom left it beatable. The computer put “nutty” onto a triple-word square. Jim saw a better move and realized he was making another mistake – thinking about what the computer should have done rather than what he needed to do now. He countered with “boogie” on a double-word square with “web” and “ado” to give him 30.

The computer put ooze on a double-word square and the score was 361 to 286. Jim needed to score big. He was 75

behind.

He picked up six tiles: “t-t-l-u-a-s”. His “f” remained from the first seven letters of the alphabet. Instantly he saw where to put the word “tasteful” it was worth 74. He was one point behind. He picked up the two remaining tiles.

The computer immediately dashed his hopes by putting “total” on a triple-word square. Jim was down 16 points. He could put his “yo” in front of a “u” which would give him six. The computer would lose ten points for its unused tiles and they would end in a tie. His win streak would be broken. He looked again. With seconds remaining he put his “y” after an “o” to spell “oy.” He put the “o” below the “y” for “yo” and that “o” also completed the word “go.” It was worth 23. He won by 17.

Jim sat back in his chair and exhaled. Win number ten was beckoning. He clicked on the menu for a new game with the same players. The computer threw up his seven letters and they were off. He started well, building up an early lead of 57 points and more or less holding it through 17 plays by each side. On number 18 the computer managed “exculpate” with the “p” on a double letter square and the “x” on a double-word square for 96. “Damn!” He was suddenly down 31 and had seven one-point-letters: “a-a-e-l-o-o-r”. He saw no options for using all seven tiles. He tried every combination rearranging the letters. None of them was worth more than 22 points and the computer only had two tiles left. Finally he saw “oral”, which, if slid between a “w” and “x”, it would make a second word “wax” with the “a” on a double-word square. It was worth 33. He only got the letters “ora” on the board when time ran out. The computer added the “ed” to “wax” and gained 15 points to win 397-375.

He slammed both fists onto his desk. His streak had ended. He looked at his watch. The two games had taken two hours and two minutes, and he had lost. “What a waste of time. I'm becoming an addict!” He was angry from the frustration of the whole day. He deleted the file marked scrabble.exe. The game was gone.

4

Adelia Morton ran her fingers through her long red hair. She closed and opened her eyes. Their deep blue color and her long eyelashes gave the gesture a powerful effect when she wanted it to. She looked at her watch. It was time to end this lunch.

“I know my husband is faithful. He is a nice guy, but I'm just not happy being around a nice guy any more. I need something more exciting.”

“But are you sure?” Lynda asked. “Men like Mark are hard to find these days and even harder to keep. Besides, I've seen his secretary, the look in her eyes. She wants him and she'll do anything to get him.”

“I know. I gave her a piece of my mind at the Christmas party. You know, she was sloshed by ten o'clock; even so she kept making for him. Mark was standing against the dining room table, talking to Aidan Johnson. She walked over to him and leaned against him in that ridiculously low-cut pile of rags she was wearing. Mark was trapped. Any movement would make it seem like he was responding to her advances. She gave him one of those looks that says, ‘I'm available’. Then she asked, ‘Is there anything you want?’ Mark, God bless him, looked at his empty glass and said, ‘Yah, I wouldn't mind another eggnog – but the unspiked stuff. I'm the designated driver.’ He acted like he was totally oblivious to what she was doing. After that defeat she went to the powder room. I followed her in and grabbed her by her Revlon-blond hair and told her if she made one more move I'd rip the dress right off her.

I probably didn't need to be so forceful. Mark has told me he thinks she's just a little hussy.”

“So why does he keep her? She’s just a secretary.”

“The blond bimbo actually types one hundred words a minute, knows all the major players on Wall Street and the color of their bedspreads. Mark’s not interested in her. He says I’m his one and only.”

“Then why, for heaven's sake, do you even give Uwe the time of day? I don't understand!”

“You won't believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

“It's partly Mark. He's a really nice guy. Nice to look at, but not a hunk, a nice lover, but no thriller, a nice friend, but there's no... well, you know what I mean. He's just... nice. Uwe, on the other hand, has something magnetic about him. When he's in the room I just have to look at him. If he is talking, I want to listen. It's the way he walks, the way he stands, the way he looks. His Swedish accent and real blond hair don't hurt either. I don't know, I just feel something,” she said, moving her hands sensually down to her abdomen. “I want him.”

Lynda took a deep breath. “You sound the same as Mark's secretary. She sees Mark like you see Uwe!”

“No, it's different. She goes after anything worth more than \$100,000 a year. If she could marry a gold statue she would. I'm interested in a person, not a walking wallet.”

“Susan, I wouldn't do it. I just wouldn't do it.”

“I'm afraid it's too late,” Susan replied as the bedroom door opened. Uwe Keller strode into the living room wearing only his boxer shorts. He shook back his long blond hair and apologized. “Sorry, I didn't know we had a guest.”

Adelia Morton put down the book she was reading. Emotions were being stirred. First, the story was too close to home. Second, this wasn't exactly feminist literature. She put the book back into her desk drawer and finished eating her last carrot. Lunch was over. It was time to return to work.

5

“Bless me Father...”

You have to be a special kind of human being to be a priest, completely apart from the vow of celibacy.

Hearing confessions can resemble working on the line for Ford Motor Company. The repetition of sins can be monotonous. For centuries people have come and confessed the same things: lying to their boss or their husband, losing their temper with their children, blaspheming, missing Mass, drinking too much, these are the safe sins. These are the sins most people confess easily and often. They are the sins a parishioner brings to his own parish priest. The shameful sins, adultery, wife abuse, receiving a bribe, indecent exposure, stealing from your children's savings... These seldom get confessed, whether serious or not, to the parish priest. He might recognize your voice.

“For I have sinned...”

Hearing your first confession is very similar to making your first confession. The common factor is the excitement of the unknown. This excitement, this fear, wears off during childhood. It returns however when it is time to confess a new sin, a serious one, one you have never committed before, thus you always remain vulnerable to the power of the Church, and the power of forgiveness.

As a confessor, the excitement lasts a bit longer, until you have “heard it all”, or at least most of it. Then even the shameful sins quickly become mundane. It is only at this point that the difference between a good confessor and a poor one becomes noticeable. Boring sins and boring confessions can lead to bored priests doing assembly line work. “For your penance say three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys, and now make an act of contrition.” Fortunately, for many priests this is not the case. It certainly was not the case for Fr. Michael Reilly.

“My last confession was...”

Fr. Reilly hoped he gave good counsel to those who came to confession, but he knew from his own experience, that even the best confessors can't hit the bull's-eye every time. Even so, good counsel isn't the point and Fr. Reilly never tired of making that point – whether in his homilies or in the confessional. The point of confession is objective. You actually confess your sins – you don't just feel sorry for them – and you actually are forgiven by God, through his designated means, the Church. “Those sins you forgive are forgiven. Those you retain are retained.” You walk in objectively guilty. You walk out objectively forgiven. How you feel about it doesn't matter and that makes a big difference in how you feel about it.

This confession began like confessions have begun for centuries. It began like the twenty others Fr. Reilly had heard that day, but this confession would be quite different.

“Bless me Father for I have sinned, my last confession was... Well, there really hasn't ever been a first confession. I just said what my wife told me to say. She is the one who was raised Catholic, not me. I suppose that makes me a Protestant. Is it OK for me to be here and talk to you like this?”

Fr. Reilly tilted his head slightly toward the screen between them. “It is perfectly fine, happens all the time.” He said, calmly, adding, “just not this way” under his breath.

“That's a relief. ...but, ah... I don't really know what I am supposed to do,” the voice continued. “I only come to church for weddings and funerals. My wife doesn't even know that I am here. I didn't tell her I wanted to see a priest. I just asked her what people do when they come to confession and she told me what Catholics say to get started. Are you sure it's OK for me to tell you this?”

Fr. Reilly did have to change his mindset for this confession. It certainly was not an ordinary one. “Yes, go right ahead, I'll listen.”

“Well, it has to do with my wife and I. I think our marriage is in trouble.”

“Yes, go on.”

“What do you recommend we do?”

Fr. Reilly waited a moment before responding to the unusually abrupt question. “I suppose it depends on the nature of the trouble. You could try talking it out if you haven't done that, or you could get some marriage counseling...” He paused briefly, then continued. “I am willing to listen as well, but I would most certainly recommend you ask the Lord for his help.” A longer pause. “O.K. Thanks.”

Suddenly, the confession, if that was what it was, finished.

Fr. Reilly didn't have enough time to be too surprised or to wonder whether he had mishandled something before the next confession began. “Bless me Father for I have sinned...”

One half hour later, when he finally finished his duty in the confessional, Fr. Reilly returned to the rectory to hear one more confession. It too would be unusual, although not unusual for him. He would “hear” the confession of Stephen Bauer by reading it. It was Stef's way to go to confession.

“Bless me Father for I have sinned, my last confession was three weeks ago. I have no mortal sin to confess.

I have committed sins of envy, anger and pride. My envy is of you and other priests. You live the life I would like to be living.

I also confess to being angry with the Lord due to my condition.

I need to confess to a bit of pride, too. I helped DRIVER Inc. perfect their virtual reality equipment. When I was done with the test run today, I snubbed a bunch of the people. They couldn't get the adjustments right.”

Stephen Bauer had been called Stef since childhood, because it was one of the first and only sounds he could make. He was a very intelligent – but a virtually unintelligible – victim of cerebral palsy. His ability to control the muscles necessary for speech were impaired beyond those of most who suffer from the disorder, yet some of his other motor abilities were quite a bit better. For the first two years Fr. Reilly was in the parish he went through an awkward process each Lent hearing Stef's confession. It resembled a game of twenty questions. He would ask Stef whether he had done various sins and Stef would nod his head yes or no. It was better than nothing, but he knew it was unsatisfactory for Stef. Fr. Reilly was thinking about this when he came up with the idea of a laptop computer. A computer may have been within the reach of the Bauer family to purchase on their own, but Fr. Reilly knew it would do something to draw the parish together if they bought it as a parish. They did.

Stef now split his time three ways. Mondays went toward writing. Tuesdays and Wednesdays went to DRIVER Inc., who had hired him because someone had read a Reader's Digest article written by him. Thursdays and Fridays went toward working at the rectory. For him this was going to work. He would leave his apartment and come to the rectory where he had his own office. The rectory, like many, was far too big for a solitary priest and Fr. Reilly was happy for the company. Over time they developed their own signals for running the rectory.

Stef's apartment was not far from his parents' home. The apartment complex accommodated handicapped people well so Stef moved in after he attended a course on fending for himself. Equipped with his electric wheelchair he was able to do most things. A front-loading laundry allowed him to wash and dry his own clothes. His bills and banking were done electronically. A nearby grocer did food deliveries. He just needed to email his request. He managed his life reasonably well now due to the generosity of his parish.

As was Fr. Reilly's custom, he finished reading the entire confession and then paused asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit on what comments to make.

“Stef, envy and anger are sins well worthy of repentance. It would be easy to say something condescending like, ‘Stef, don't worry about your condition, I think you are a super person simply because of how much you have accomplished,’ but sin is sin.”

Fr. Reilly was going to leave it at that, but he saw that Stef wanted more attention. He added. “I don't understand God or evil. Somehow, in his perfect will, he has allowed your condition to exist and expects you to glorify him through it. In that, he expects no less of you than any other Christian.

“If God decides to heal you instantly, great! Then become a priest. If not, live as joyfully as you can and be an encouragement to others, especially at work.

“For your penance I want you to meditate on Luke's Gospel, chapter 22, verses 39-46. It is the part about Jesus struggling to say yes to the will of his Father. Now make your act of contrition.”

Stef, in his own awkward language, spoke the words that place the sinner in the merciful hands of a loving God. Fr. Reilly pronounced the words of absolution and left Stef alone to do his penance in the house chapel. Fr. Reilly then went to the office and left Stef a final couple of notices to put into the next week's parish bulletin. The rest of the day was filled with hospital rounds, homily preparation, afternoon confessions and the 5pm Saturday evening Mass. After dinner he had two marriage preparation sessions. It wasn't until he had finished saying his night prayers that his mind came back to the odd confession he had heard that morning, but given how tired he was he only had time to note it before he fell off to sleep.

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About the author

I am originally from Minnesota and know how to dress in -40 degree temperatures. I have been doing Christian youth-work since I was 19 and was one of the first Catholics to work as Area Director for Young Life. I write a monthly newsletter on youth culture and am the International Director of Kairos, a Christian youth program serving those 13 to 30.

I met Pope John Paul II in 1981 during a conference I organized for 60 leaders in the Charismatic renewal, five days before he was shot. I met Yasser Arafat, the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Patriarchs of Jerusalem and

one of the Chief Rabbis of Jerusalem during the visit of John Paul II to Israel.

I lived for 15 years in Belfast N.Ireland and London, England, which was where I wrote *The Archangel of Westminster*. I began writing *The Red Madonna* in 1998 and had more or less finished it by 2002. I began the follow-up novel, currently titled, *The Cardinal Conspiracy* in 2003, and hope to finish it before the next conclave.

I am also the author of *A Concise Catholic Catechism*, a contributor to [How to be Ecumenical Today](#), and the creator of *iPray* -- an aid to daily prayer.

I am an Elder (leader) of the [Servants of the Word](#), an ecumenical brotherhood of men who live the vows of celibacy, simplicity and obedience. I have visited 26 countries and speak German fluently. I travel about 10 days of the month. My pillow lives in Lansing, Michigan.

My vices are golf, pistachios, chocolate and single malt scotch. Someday I will repent of them.

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