

Dismantling the Cross

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IN AUGUST 2009, the year Pope Benedict XVI designated The Year of the Priest, I attended Mass on a Saturday evening in a small, comfortable parish on the coast of Maine. The Mass was the popular Vigil Mass that fulfills a Catholic's Sunday obligation. The Gospel, the same for all the weekend Masses, was Mark's story of the rich young man. In Mark's telling, a young man kneels before Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus reminds him of the commandments, which the young man claims to observe, and then Jesus, looking at him with love, says, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." The young man's face falls and he goes away sad, because he has many possessions (Mk 10:17–22).

"So how are we to understand this Gospel?" the priest asked in his homily that followed the reading of the Gospel, as the congregation of year-round residents and vacationing visitors settled in the pews.

"Does it mean that you should run out and sell your nice houses on the coast of Maine and give the money to the poor?"

The question was faintly satirical; the answer, no, of course not. No, what Jesus was asking, the priest went on to say, was that each of us give up whatever in our lives comes between us and him: our bad temper, for example, or an addiction to sweets.

The following day, visiting family further south, I attended Mass again, in a different parish. The same Gospel was read and another ser-

mon was preached, this one about the excessive greed and materialism that led to the collapse of the financial markets the summer before.

When I returned to Connecticut from Maine, I asked friends in neighboring parishes about the sermons they had heard preached the previous weekend. All the sermons recounted to me were tailored to the laity; none took the words of Jesus at face value. In Benedict's Year of the Priest, no one mentioned the possibility of a priestly vocation. No one mentioned the countless men and women in former ages, who, as if to compensate and console Jesus for his loss of the rich young man, responded to Mark's Gospel by leaving everything and following him. No one mentioned Antony of the Desert, the father of Western monasticism, who, on hearing Matthew's version of the same Gospel, did precisely what the priest in Maine gently lampooned: he went out immediately and gave away his inheritance, devoting himself from then on, in the words of St. Athanasius, "to the discipline rather than the household."¹

I

God is the fullness of truth. In him, seeming opposites hold together: the demands of justice and mercy; the mysteries of suffering and healing; his omniscience and our free will. Whereas we, with our short perspectives, see contradictions everywhere, God sees from afar. Where we are partial and confused, he is whole and, in a sense, simple. To borrow a category from physics, God is a unified field.

Sometimes a passage of Scripture or the swift intuition of a saint gives us an intimation of the divine simultaneity. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you" (Phil 2:12–13). "It is because [God] is just that 'he is . . . abundant in mercy, for he knows our frailty, he remembers we are only dust.'"² At graced moments in our lives, we may suddenly realize that seemingly opposed forces have, in fact, furthered a single end; or grasp the mercy of the law, that has lovingly condescended to our frailty.

More commonly, in what we might call ordinary time, the truth

¹ St. Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 6.

² St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *General Correspondence*, vol. 2, trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1988), 1093. From a letter to P. Adolphe Roul-land, dated May 9, 1897.

that the Catholic Church exists to convey comes to us piecemeal and incrementally. In the liturgical year, as the seasons and feasts revolve, the Church holds before our eyes different exemplars of the faith, different pieces of revelation and chapters of the Christian story. The Church celebrates not only Christmas and Easter, but also Christ's Baptism and Ascension, Pentecost, the Feast of All Souls, the Feast of Christ's Body and Blood, and so on. One saint's charism is the mystery of the Trinity; another's, Christ's hidden years in Nazareth. Popes, like saints, succeed one another in history, build on one another's legacies, qualify or expand one another's teachings. After John Paul II, in Assisi, dramatized the ecumenical dimension of faith, Benedict XVI, at Regensburg, distinguished Christianity from Islam. When Francis was elected pope, he immediately drew attention to the *other* sins that, in the language of Scripture, cry to heaven for judgment: not only murder and sodomy, but also oppressing the poor, neglecting the widow and orphan, and denying the worker a just wage.³ Like a many-faceted ball over a dance floor, the Church, in time, reflects to the observant Catholic the whole of divine revelation, never lingering too long on any one part of the story, or stressing one truth of faith at the expense of another.⁴

This is the ideal. Realistically, the ordered unfolding of the liturgy aside, life in the Church has never been a balanced or a stately progression. Not for nothing did G. K. Chesterton compare the Church to a reeling chariot, veering this way and that, barely skirting disaster. Great saints (recall Thérèse of Lisieux's childhood pronouncement, "I choose all!"), graced moments, and golden ages aside, the history of the Church is the history of a people continually struggling with the difficulty of holding seemingly contradictory truths in suspension. It is the history of a people continually tempted by heresy, which precisely stresses one truth of faith at the expense of another and simplifies, not by integration, but by

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), §1867.

⁴ Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 23–24. "If a prayer . . . stresses any one mystery of faith in an exclusive or an excessive manner, in the end it will adequately satisfy none but those who are of a corresponding temperament, and even the latter will eventually become conscious of their need of truth in its entirety. For instance, if a prayer deals exclusively with God's mercy, it will not ultimately satisfy even a delicate and tender piety, because this truth calls for its complement—the fact of God's justice and majesty."

subtraction. (Christ's divinity must go, or his humanity; predestination or man's free will.) So dualistic are man's temptations, and so ready is he to distinguish oppositions even where none exist, Satan, in his undertakings, frequently begins by carving up the good. (*You, be concerned for the poor, and you, for the unborn.*) The struggle for the whole truth—both for the capacious mysteries protected by dogmas and for every kind of fruitful synthesis in ordinary life—is perennial in the Church. She proceeds, not in a straight line, but by digressions and corrections, near shipwrecks and counterreformations large and small. Not only does she sometimes stress one truth of faith at the expense of another, she sometimes does so interminably, in long languishings more reminiscent of a swamped ship than a swift chariot. The harsh effects of Jansenism, for example, lingered for generations, the Church seemingly adrift in the long darkness of a polar winter, until finally, the wind of the Spirit rising in the persons of SS. Thérèse and Faustina, she turned and shipped slowly back in the direction of light and mercy.

Complicating matters further, all truths are not equal. It would not be enough even for the Church to grant all truths equal time and hold them in perfect balance. Rather, she must discern and express the right relationships among different truths, some of which are foundational and eternal, while others are ordered to foundational truths, either as consequences that follow from them, or as means to their end.

It is the great foundational truths of the faith that must be preserved at all cost: the truth of God's salvific love for all men, for example, to which the truth of the moral law is ordered. Apart from God's saving love, the moral law is everywhere rejected as too hard, just as suffering not understood as ordered to final healing is increasingly rejected as well. When foundational truths falter, truths ordered to them also falter, and the whole edifice can come down, in Pope Francis's words, "like a house of cards."⁵

II

Generally speaking, there are two principal vocations in the life of the Catholic Church: marriage, on the one hand, and celibate priesthood

⁵ Pope Francis, "A Big Heart Open to God," interview by Antonio Spadaro, S.J., *America*, September 30, 2013.

and religious life on the other. Both, as it happens, are expressions of conjugal love. In the normal calling of marriage, an individual binds himself for life to another human being. In the exceptional calling of priesthood or religious life, an individual binds himself eternally to God.

The fruitful life of the Church has always depended upon a healthy interaction between these two states of life. In truly Catholic periods or cultures, an equilibrium has been established between them, whereby the family bears children some of whom are called to religion, and religious life in turn justifies and sanctifies the family.⁶ In Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock*, a novel about Catholic Quebec in the seventeenth century, a young domestic heroine whose love of order and cleanliness is such that she cannot sleep in a dirty bed, is balanced in the world of the novel by a beautiful ascetic in a church in Montreal, walled up behind the Blessed Sacrament with a stone for a pillow. Like the French ships in the novel that convey to the Canadian colonies "everything to comfort the body and soul," the capacious hold of the Church enfolds both vocations.⁷ Neither Shaker nor Protestant, the Church affirms both women's choices, just as the young heroine of the novel is enamored of her alter ego in Montreal, and the recluse, in her turn, prays for her brothers and sisters in the world, night and day.

Still, this mutual dependency and reciprocal respect notwithstanding, in the whole history of the Church the choice for celibacy has always been understood to be objectively higher than the choice for marriage, because the celibate anticipates in his flesh the world of the future resurrection.⁸ Rather than pass through the intermediate state of earthly marriage, the priest or religious steps outside the bounds of ordinary life and begins to live, in advance, the nuptial realities of heaven.

Contrary to popular impressions, the documents of Vatican II did not break with this traditional understanding. The same documents that resoundingly affirm marriage continue to assign to celibacy an "eminent" position, one "always . . . held in particular honor in the Church." In the language of *Lumen Gentium*, the religious, by his pro-

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 118.

⁷ Willa Cather, *Shadows on the Rock* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 209.

⁸ *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) §16.

fession, seeks “*more* abundant fruit” from the grace of his baptism; is “*more* intimately consecrated to divine service”; and “*more* fully manifests to all believers the presence of heavenly goods already possessed here below” (emphasis mine).⁹ In St. John Chrysostom’s formulation, “It is something better than what is admitted to be good that is the most excellent good,”¹⁰ a conclusion echoed by John Paul II in his exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, where he also concludes that, “Virginity, or celibacy, by liberating the human heart in a unique way . . . bears witness that the Kingdom of God is that pearl of great price which is preferred to every other value no matter how great.”¹¹

Put another way, the Catholic view of human life and history is never circular but always teleological, always “straining forward,” in the words of St. Paul, “to what lies ahead” (Phil 3:13). Catholic family life is not ordered to itself, but to what is future and ultimate: life with God and his saints in heaven. Catholic families do not bear children simply so that their children may bear children, and so on. They bear children for God. For people like St. Thérèse’s parents, Louis and Zélie Martin, all of whose living children ended their lives as religious, “It would be just as senseless and unchristian for a family to be shut in on itself as for a believer in the Old Testament to reject its fulfillment in the New.”¹²

Few families in the history of the Church have risen to the level of the Martins in this regard. But whether acted upon or not, whether explicit or implicit, there was a consensus in Christendom as to the direction and meaning of human life. In a time of late puberty and high mortality, a time before Viagra and estrogen therapy, there were few illusions about the duration of either sexuality or marriage, and a general acknowledgment that, soon enough, everyone would be obedient, celibate, and poor. While the vast majority of people in those days chose marriage in the first place, if they survived it they were less likely than our contemporaries to choose it again. Even before death intervened in a marriage, a small minority of spouses separated by mutual agreement and entered monasteries. Many more widows and widowers

⁹ *Lumen Gentium* (1964) §42, 44.

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, *Virginity*, X: PG 48:540.

¹¹ *FC*, §16.

¹² Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit*, 118.

did the same. Marriage was not regarded as a treadmill to be endlessly resumed, but as a passing phase of life, even as everyone, married or not, was passing from earth to heaven, where “they neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Mt 22:30). In the view of St. Ignatius, marriage was so provisional a state it was scarcely deserving of a vow, “for it must be remembered that a vow deals with matters that lead us closer to evangelical perfection . . . and whatever tends to withdraw us from perfection may not be made the object of a vow, for example, a business career, the married state, and so forth.”¹³

The great novel of this view of human life is *Kristin Lavransdatter*, a three-volume saga of medieval Norway by Sigrid Undset. Late in the novel, when the widowed heroine is settled in a monastery after many years in the world, she ponders the sisterhood she has finally joined:

When, after this hour of prayer, Kristin went back through the dormitory and saw the sisters sleeping two and two on sacks of straw in their beds, clad in the habits which they never put off, she thought how much unlike she must be to these women, who from their youth up had done naught but serve their Maker. The world was a master whom ‘twas not easy to fly, when once one had yielded to its dominion. Ay, and in sooth she had not fled the world—she had been cast out, as a hard master drives a worn-out servant from his door—and now she had been taken in here, as a merciful lord takes in an old serving-maid and of his mercy gives her a little work, while he shelters and feeds the worn-out, friendless old creature.¹⁴

Of course, in the view of the human community, intent on its own survival, it is one thing when an old person leaves the world for religion, and quite another when a young person, and someone’s heir, does the same.

¹³ St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1951), 157–58. The reader who bristles at St. Ignatius’s account of marriage might remember that, in Ignatius’s day, most marriages lasted until death, suggesting that what holds a marriage together more effectively than a promise or a vow is the health of the larger faith traditions in which individual marriages are embedded.

¹⁴ Sigrid Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, vol. 3, *The Cross* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 369.

In the abstract or the case of someone else's child, Christendom conceded the superiority of celibacy, but when the Franciscans or Dominicans came to town families famously locked up their sons. Humanity is ordered to fecundity and Nature fights for her rights, "pleads her cause with prodigious eloquence, with a terrible power of seduction."¹⁵ Like the Israelites in the Old Testament who insisted on a visible King (1 Sam 8), Nature demands physical intercourse and blood heirs, and fiercely resists any prioritizing of God over human beings or future over earthly goods. Thus even the most saintly celibates, in their youth, met with scandalized¹⁶ resistance and hostility. It is easy to forget, for example, now that St. Thérèse's cult is secure, what the neighbors were thinking and saying as one after another the Martin girls left their widowed father for the convent. When Thérèse was finally canonized and her family's dreams realized, Céline, Thérèse's sister, recalled "the humiliations that had been our lot and that of our dear father: relatives distancing themselves from us, apologizing for being part of our family; friends and acquaintances who said among themselves: 'What good was his piety?'"¹⁷

It is easy to forget, too, that hostility to celibacy can afflict the saint interiorly as well as exteriorly. St Francis was not only stoned in the street, but also taunted by internal accusers. We think of him as having made one definitive act of renunciation when he stripped himself in the town square, but a close reading of his life suggests a long struggle, painfully waged.¹⁸ As he said sardonically toward the end of his

¹⁵ Raïssa Maritain, *Raïssa's Journal* (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1974), 55.

¹⁶ If the word "scandal" always implies a betrayed ideal, in this case the betrayed ideal is Nature and natural relationships.

¹⁷ Stephane-Joseph Piat, O.F.M., *Celine* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 112.

¹⁸ See, for example, the story of Francis's snow family in *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, ed. Marion A. Habig (Quincy: Franciscan Press, 1991) 458–59. "But when he saw the temptation did not leave him in spite of the scourging . . . he went out into the garden and cast himself naked into the deep pile of snow. Then gathering handfuls of snow, he made from it seven lumps like balls. And setting them before him, he began to speak to his body: 'Behold,' he said, 'this large one is your wife; these four are your two sons and your two daughters; the other two are your servant and your maid, whom you must have to serve you. Hurry . . . and clothe them all, for they are dying of cold. But if caring for them in so many ways troubles you, be solicitous for serving God alone.'"

life, "Don't canonize me too quickly. I am perfectly capable of fathering a child."¹⁹

But once the struggle was over, and the miracles and answered prayers began to appear, then the celibate in those days was reclaimed by the human family, *because he had proven himself fertile after all*. Then resistance gave way to acceptance, and acceptance to passionate acclaim. Then everyone wanted a piece of the saint. Then everyone wanted access to his body and his prayers, as the one who was coldly spurned for choosing heavenly over earthly goods, was joyfully embraced for bringing heavenly goods to earth.

In *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather traces this trajectory in the life of the recluse in Montreal. On the far side of her parents' anguish, her fiancé's grief and her own suffering, the recluse emerges in the novel as a binding force in Catholic Canada, a treasure held in common. After angels repair her spinning wheel in her upper room in Montreal, the story travels across country:

By many a fireside the story of Jeanne Le Ber's spinning-wheel was told and retold with loving exaggeration during that severe winter. The word of her visit from the angels went abroad over snow-burdened Canada to the remote parishes. Wherever it went, it brought pleasure, as if the recluse herself had sent to all those families whom she did not know some living beauty. . . .²⁰

There is another celibate in Cather's novel who trades in living beauty, who is also an intermediary who brings heavenly goods to earth. If the recluse's vocation is extraordinary, the vocation of the priest is ordinary. But one meaning of ordinary is quotidian, and whereas miracles of the recluse's sort are rare, the priest works his miracles daily. Every day, in the confessional, he forgives sin. Every day, on the altar, he brings God to earth as food. In the character of Bishop Laval—in his height and his great age, his legendary charity and formidable endurance—Cather gives the reader an icon of the dogged, indispensable vocation of the

¹⁹ Julien Green, *The Life and Times of Francis of Assisi*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 194.

²⁰ Cather, *Shadows on the Rock*, 136–37.

priest. If the recluse in her atelier is literally raised above the common lot, the old Bishop in his daily work is literally on the ground with his flock. But his vocation, too, is vertical in its orientation. His vocation, too, reaches to heaven. The paradigmatic image in the novel of the old man at work is the image of him ringing the church bell before dawn, calling the working people to Mass: "Many good people who did not want to go to Mass at all, when they heard that hoarse, frosty bell clanging out under the black sky . . . groaned and went to the church. Because they thought of the old Bishop at the end of the bell-rope, and because his will was stronger than theirs."²¹

Both the recluse and the priest, by their sacrifices and prayers, knit together the human family. But it is on the renunciations of the priest especially that the spiritual life of the laity depends. In the Catholic view, the life of Christ has passed into his sacraments,²² and only the priest can effect the sacraments that guarantee Christ's life to Christ's body. The spiritual health of Catholic people depends absolutely on certain individuals choosing the vertical orientation of celibate priesthood over the horizontal orientation of marriage. Married life in the Church is never equal to priesthood and religious life but always dependent on them, as the horizontal of the cross hangs on the vertical. Earthly marriage is never an absolute, but always an intermediate vocation, ordered to the Wedding Feast of the Lamb as a means to an end. The recluse in her upper room, the old Bishop hanging on the bell-rope that disappears over his head—these are examples of individuals who have vowed themselves to God above all, and who then hand down to those below what they receive from above.

III

We have been speaking of the traditional ordering of the Church's life; her traditional understanding of the relationship between her lay and religious vocations. Today, has this understanding changed?

From the outside, the Church looks much the same. Before an outsider or non-Catholic knows anything of the Church's life, before he attends a Mass or sees the inside of a confessional, he is aware of this

²¹ Ibid, 74.

²² St. Leo the Great, *Sermo* 74, 2: *PL* 54, 398.

man or woman, this priest or that nun, whom he perhaps passes in the street, and who then becomes the face of the Church for him.

If he is like most outsiders, he will be wary of this face, or sign, that he connects, correctly, with celibacy. He may be uncomfortable or repelled by the sign, or he may be attracted to it or impressed by it, but in any case, for him the priest or nun will be decisively Catholic. Inside the Church, asked what is most important to Catholicism, the practicing Catholic will probably answer, the Eucharist. But the outsider, without having read a word of theology, is most keenly aware of the priest, who in fact makes the Eucharist possible.

Or our outsider may encounter the Church in so-called Catholic literature, where again the Church's traditional views will be communicated to him. Either he will read about priests or nuns (e.g., *The Diary of a Country Priest*, *In This House of Brede*, *Morte d'Urban*, *Mariette in Ecstasy*), or he will read about a love between a man and a woman that gives way before a greater love (e.g., *The End of the Affair*, *Brideshead Revisited*, *Kristin Lavransdatter*). These latter novels—so different from the novels of Jane Austen!—might well have affixed to their frontispieces as a warning Paul Claudel's axiom, "God promises by his creatures but only fulfills by himself,"²³ or François Mauriac's baleful observation, "Today, after so many centuries, [Christ] is still there . . . just as we know him in the Gospels, with his inordinate demands, separating man from woman and woman from man, destroying the human couple to the scandal of many."²⁴

Protestant novels, primarily concerned as they are with familial and social arrangements and the individual's place in them, ordinarily end with marriage. But the Catholic novel, whose proper subject matter is the relationship of the individual to God, can only be finally consummated outside the bounds of the novel and even of life itself, which explains both why so few Catholic novels are entirely successful, and why so many end with death.²⁵ The emphasis in Catholic literature is never

²³ Paul Claudel, quoted in Bernard Bro, *The Little Way*, trans. Alan Neame (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), 108.

²⁴ François Mauriac, *The Son of Man*, trans. Bernard Murchland (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing, 1960), 72.

²⁵ For example, *Viper's Tangle*, *Diary of a Country Priest*, *The Power and the Glory*, *Kristin Lavransdatter*. Despite her Catholic sympathies, Willa Cather was not Catholic, and *Shadows on the Rock*, ending as it does with earthly marriage, is not a quintes-

on social consolidation and earthly marriage. Rather, the true Catholic note is a note of rupture and transcendence, rupture and implied restoration on a higher level, goods for which religious life—real people making real sacrifices with an eye to eternity—stand surety.

Even in non-Catholic, equivocally Catholic, or anti-Catholic literature or films, if the Catholic Church comes into the story, priests and religious represent her, reinforcing for our outsider the Church's traditional ordering of her internal life. Always it is the exceptional calling of the priest or the nun, or the even more exceptional calling of the priest who is also an exorcist, that stands for the Church, in a kind of metonymy. The author's attitude to Catholicism may be melodramatic and hostile (Henry James's *The American*), sardonic and world-weary (Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*), or conspiracy-minded and debunking of Catholic claims (anything by Dan Brown), but in every case the author's fascination with Catholic priesthood and religious life is self-evident.

The media, too, turns out to be obsessed with priests and nuns, whether railing against them (Pope Benedict, abusive priests) or fawning over them (Pope Francis, liberal American nuns, Mother Teresa). Even the sexual abuse scandals in the Church, and the media's preoccupation with them, evince the Church's traditional claims, testifying as they do to the tremendous importance of the Catholic priesthood, for good or ill.

From all of this evidence, either consciously or unconsciously our outsider will conclude that the celibate vocations are the key to the Catholic Church. It follows that if he decides to become a Catholic himself, it will be religious life that has attracted him, otherwise he would be content to become, or remain a Protestant. Put another way, he desires something more than baptism and matrimony, the only sacraments Christendom agrees can be effected without a priest. He may have ideas of becoming a priest or a religious himself. Or he may feel the need for the strengthening that confirmation promises, or the mysterious food of the Eucharist. Perhaps something weighs on

entially Catholic novel. But in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* Cather struck the pure Catholic note, ending the novel not only with the physical death of the Archbishop, but also with his deathbed memories of his earlier death to the world, when he and his close friend left everything—family and country—to follow Christ.

his conscience that he has been unable privately to shake off; or he has had experience of evil, experience that has shaken and defiled him, and harbors a hope that a priest may be able to help him.

On the other hand, it may not be a specific sacrament but a whole way of life that attracts him, an attitude to life different from what he has encountered elsewhere. On the deepest level, a person comes to the Catholic Church because he is disappointed with everything else. Work, family life, other religious communions have not sufficed. Our convert may have been abused in his natural family, or betrayed in a marriage, but even if his relationships have been harmonious and his work in the world successful, he begins to feel that the horizon of his life is simply too low. Dimly, he begins to understand that natural affections, not ordered to eternal realities, are doomed. And so he finds himself attracted to the idealism and higher horizon of Catholic religious life. He hears the silence and the gales of laughter coming from behind convent walls, or he witnesses the serene, life-giving fatherhood of a holy priest, and he wants to be part of a church that has such vocations in its midst. If he is married, he begins to suspect that his marriage cannot stand on its own, but needs the bracing vertical of celibate priesthood and religious life to keep it true. If he is single, for whatever reason, he hopes to discover his life's true meaning in the Church, the Church that has never held up marriage between a man and a woman as the highest good.

In brief, whatever his situation, he wants his life ordered to what is greater. He wants a larger context for his private projects and relationships. And he wants peace, the peace that the world cannot give, and expects to find it in the Church that has always prioritized the contemplative over the active life.²⁶

IV

So our outsider becomes a Catholic. And in the Church of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, what does he find?

Certainly, the priest is still there, celebrating Mass, baptizing ba-

²⁶ See, for example, "The Primacy of Contemplation in Faith," in von Balthasar, *Who Is a Christian?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 80–85, or "The Primacy of the Logos over the Ethos," in Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 85–95.

bies, presiding at marriages. If our convert needs to be baptized, a priest will baptize him. If he was previously baptized as a Protestant, a priest will hear his confession, a priest or bishop will confirm him, and he will receive Eucharist consecrated by the same priest or bishop. And in the reception of the sacraments—in the sacrament of baptism most dramatically but in the other sacraments as well—the convert will receive, together with an entirely new or reinvigorated life, an indelible impression of the generative power of the Catholic priest. From this point on, he will be able to attest to it from his own experience: the priest, at his ordination, receives potency of a supernatural kind, capable of generating and sustaining new men and women, who live by the power of Christ, who has redeemed them.

Still, however momentous the changes wrought by the sacraments of initiation, and however powerful the convert's impression of the part played by the priest, soon enough, as he perseveres in his new life, he begins to understand that in the Church at large the center of gravity—or at least the perceived center of gravity—has shifted away from the ministerial priesthood. What he previously understood in the abstract—that thousands of priests were laicized in the aftermath of Vatican II, seminaries emptied and monasteries collapsed—he now begins to understand in the concrete, in the plain fact that in many parts of the country there simply are not enough priests. And even where there are enough priests, he notices that their sacramental importance has been deemphasized, and distance introduced between them and their parishioners.

For example, after he consecrates the Eucharist, the priest in many parishes sits to one side while lay people distribute the sacrament to other lay people who, in turn, communicate themselves.

As for the sacrament of penance, in many parts of the country it has all but died out. One hour a week in most parishes is all the time allotted to confession, and even then, there is often nobody there. The consensus seems to be that the general confession in the Mass is sufficient; personal confession to a priest is no longer necessary.

Then, too, because the laity can distribute the Eucharist, they often carry it to the sick, where again, a traditional opportunity for confession—not to mention reception of the sacrament of the anointing of the sick—is lost. And as cremation becomes commonplace and even

many Catholics scatter remains, a growing number of Catholics is deciding to dispense with a funeral Mass altogether, denying the priest even that last, traditional opportunity to exercise his ministry.

As for exorcism—a particular competency of a specially trained priest—many archdioceses no longer have an exorcist on staff. All of which leads one to wonder whether the priesthood is presently deemphasized because there are not enough priests, or if there are not enough priests in part because their ministry is increasingly deemphasized. It should be admitted, too, that there are priests who cooperate in their own marginalization: by refusing to visit the dying at night, for example, or to hear a confession outside the scheduled hour.

Meanwhile the laity, the state to which so many priests and religious reverted in the wake of the Council, is everywhere in the ascendant. If the priest's job description has shrunk, opportunities for the laity have expanded. The year 1987 was explicitly dedicated to the laity, but all the years since Vatican II could properly be called the Era of the Laity, when, in a pronounced and compensating swerve of Chesterton's chariot, the laity are said to have come into their own. They are the true Church of God, this line of reasoning goes; the ordained ministers are simply the supporting cast. It is the active apostolates that matter; contemplative life is disappearing because it has been outgrown. Accordingly, the emphasis is no longer on the priesthood *per se* but on "the priesthood of all believers"; no longer on literal poverty but on "detachment"; no longer on virginity but on "chastity according to one's station in life." Marriage especially has been elevated in the Church's preaching to a point where even well-formed Catholics now believe that it is equivalent to priesthood and religious life. Scriptures that challenge this view are either shrugged off ("Jesus didn't mean that") or reinterpreted, and then applied in a spiritual or metaphorical sense to the laity.

At the same time, there has been a strong push to identify and canonize more lay and married saints, as if the small number of married saints relative to the number of canonized celibates were a function of prejudice rather than the fruit of an underlying truth. Among young intellectual Catholics, John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* continues to be in vogue, at least those parts of it that line up with contemporary pieties. And as marriage and family life have been increasingly romanticized, the question is increasingly asked whether priests should not be

allowed to marry, too, and the physical privileges of marriage universally enjoyed. Everywhere, in brief, the emphasis in the Church is increasingly on natural rather than supernatural relationships, in a shift that amounts to a kind of supersessionism in reverse, as the natural or blood family, as in Judaism, comes to the fore.

It was in this Church, influenced both by Protestantism and the secular culture and ideologically primed for a final shrugging off of the priest, that the news of the clerical sexual abuse scandals surfaced. It was at this point, at the very end of the century Pope Leo XIII foresaw would be dire for the Church, that we learned that, devastating as was the vast exodus of priests and nuns after the Council, the real problem was not those who left but a small percentage of those who stayed, like Judas, who stayed with Jesus even when many of Jesus's other disciples fell away (Jn 6:60–71), in order to deliver the death blow from within.

In the chaos that followed, as waves of disbelief, fury and grief swept through the Church, the surrounding culture, smelling blood, moved in for the kill. Now it could be openly expressed: hatred for the Catholic Church and her celibate hierarchy. Now the traditional script in which the celibate is belatedly vindicated by the holy fruits of his life could be torn up and replaced by a script that says that celibacy ends in depravity and asceticism does not have to be affirmed at all.

In this script, celibacy is not an ideal but an abomination. It is not a harmless anachronism but an occasion and even a cause of sin. *No one can be celibate*, not even Jesus himself. The sexual fantasies that tempted Jesus in Martin Scorsese's 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Dan Brown's 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code* treats as historical facts, suspensefully unearthed; and by 2013, in Mark Adano's opera *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, sex between Jesus and Mary Magdalene is simply a ho-hum given, with the Magdalene Jesus's teacher rather than the other was around (*Rabboni!*), as she initiates him into the mysteries of carnal love.

As for Jesus's mother, the original celibate²⁷ and contemplative in the Christian tradition—the one who, standing in the breach, delivered to

²⁷ "But before the annunciation of her election, this woman called to the most exalted maternity had not wanted marriage and motherhood for herself; and this was against every tradition of her people." Edith Stein, *Essays on Women*, trans. Freda Mary Oben (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1987, 1996), 198.

the world the Christ she conceived from above—she, too, must be pulled down. If celibacy is the problem, Mary especially must be defamed, and the Annunciation repudiated, because it was at the Annunciation, the hinge on which history turns, that a new principle of generation entered the world. In the past, when the Church was in disgrace, Mary was given a pass, but no longer. Now the blasphemies enumerated in the First Saturday Devotions from Fatima—*Blasphemies against the Immaculate Conception, Blasphemies against [Mary's] virginity*, and so on—take on flesh. If the blasphemers hesitate to attack Mary directly, indirect methods serve. If she is not credible as a villain, perhaps she may be credible as a victim. The Irish writer Calvin Tobin's strategy, in his 2013 play and novel *The Testament of Mary*, is to have Mary desacralize herself. In her own words, in her "testimony," she dismantles both her own reputation and Christianity's. As she tells it, there was no Virgin Birth or Incarnation. There was no Resurrection. The disciples made it all up, for gain. They pressured and manipulated her, harassed and tormented her. Her contempt for these imaginary disciples is Tobin's own contempt for contemporary Irish priests, just as Thomas Cromwell's attitude to English monks and nuns in Hilary Mantel's novels *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), is Mantel's own attitude to Catholic celibacy, expressed through the character of Cromwell.²⁸

In these widespread contemporary attacks on the Church, vituperative outrage and blanket condemnations are the rule. In Peter Matthiessen's 2014 novel *In Paradise*, for example, it is taken for granted that Pius XII and the Vatican were responsible for the Holocaust. In the 2013 film *Philomena*, a layperson—Philomena herself, an unwed mother of a gay son—can be holy, but no priest or nun. Celibates, by this point, *by definition* are monsters of hypocrisy and enemies of natural life.

On the other hand, Hilary Mantel, being a greater artist, plays a deeper game. In her acclaimed novels about Henry VIII's England, Thomas More is her villain, as much for his hair shirt as his orthodoxy, and Thomas Cromwell is her hero, the man who pulled down England's monasteries. But outrage and self-righteous indignation are not Cromwell's style. As Mantel conceives him, Cromwell is the future:

²⁸ See Hilary Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies* (New York: Henry Holt, 2012), esp. 41–47, and Mantel's memoir, *Giving Up the Ghost* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003).

the reasonable, practical, thoroughly secular man, the man in whom the religious impulse is finally dead. The passions of religion—the zeal of the reformers; the anguished scruples of More; even the attenuated orthodoxy of the king—leave him cold. Even contempt is too strong a word for his attitude to religion and those still deceived by it. As the revelations of clerical sin in our own day finally cease to shock, and anger and disbelief give way to disgust and contempt, Mantel, as Thomas Cromwell, proposes indifference as the last word, the final nail in the coffin of Catholic Christianity.

And the Church's response to all of this?

Because of the guilt of the few, she has been largely silent before her accusers. As the scandals have unfolded, she has scarcely attempted to defend celibacy; instead, she has circled the wagons around marriage. Sometimes it seems as if all the idealism formerly attached to priesthood and religious life has now been transferred to marriage and the natural family. In my parish, the pews that emptied after the scandals have gradually filled up with large, home-schooling families. New rituals have appeared: a children's offering at the offertory; a final blessing for children too young to receive Holy Communion. Mother's Day and Father's Day have become red-letter days in the Church, and not only weddings but even some proposals of marriage are undertaken with a pious solemnity formerly reserved for religious professions. And whereas St. Ignatius deemed marriage scarcely deserving of a vow, now, on a regular basis, married couples are invited to stand and renew their marriage vows *en masse*, in a ritual uncomfortably reminiscent of the mass weddings of Sun Myung Moon.

And still there is virtually no preaching on priesthood or religious life. There is talk of natural family planning more than of Jesus's supernatural family, "born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (Jn 1:13). In the past, on Holy Thursday, the pastor washed the feet of other priests and lay brothers, witnessing to the truth that Jesus washed the feet of men who had left everything to follow him. Now, on Holy Thursday, he washes the feet of married men.

In the short run, it does no harm and possibly much good to try to strengthen monogamous, lifelong marriage, but to think that this is the answer to the Church's problems is to think as man thinks, rather than as God thinks. In the long run, if the vertical to which the hori-

zontal relationship of marriage is ordered comes down, not only marriage but the Gospel itself will fall. When the Church stresses relationships between creatures more than the relationship of the individual to God—when she treats marriage as an end rather than as a seedbed for vocations—the Gospel message itself is compromised. The hard Paschal truths at the core of Christianity—the truth that the natural family is never fully commensurate with Christ’s new family; the truth that a man’s enemies will be members of his own household (Mt 10:36) and that in order to be Christ’s disciple he must hate, not only father and mother, wife and children, but also his own life (Lk 14:26)—are suppressed. And in the atmosphere of tribalism, human respect, and sentimentality that ensues, an illusion of human sufficiency creeps in, an illusion that, in our human strength, we can meet one another’s needs.

Recently I heard a sermon preached on the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. In Matthew’s parable, ten virgins go with their lamps to meet a bridegroom. The five wise virgins have oil for their lamps; the five foolish have none. When the bridegroom is near, the foolish ask the wise for oil, but the wise refuse them. Looking for oil elsewhere, the foolish are shut out from the feast. When they return and knock, the bridegroom says, “I do not know you” (Mt 25:1–13).

The meaning of the parable is clear enough. It is about the vertical dimension of the Christian life: the primacy of the individual’s relationship to God and the limitations and final inadequacy of human relationships. The virgins who hold on to their oil are not condemned by Jesus; on the contrary, he calls them wise. The foolish show their foolishness both in their delinquency and in their attempt to get oil from the others. The “oil” that lights our human lamps—our fundamental fuel, if you will—comes from God. Like the oil of chrism in the sacrament of baptism, it signifies sanctifying grace, the gift of the Holy Spirit. This gift of grace we can receive only from God, either directly in prayer, or sacramentally, through his chosen ministers. We can neither give it to others, nor receive it from them. Moreover, the high virtue of charity—“willing good to someone,” in Aquinas’s formulation—demands that we tell this truth.²⁹ To attempt, instead, to do what the foolish demand of us—to try to be “nice,” in other words—or to make

²⁹ *Summa theologiae* I, q. 20, a. 2.

foolish demands ourselves, avails nothing. But the preacher, influenced I dare say by current trends in the Church, offered his own interpretation. "Here's what I think," he said. "They should have shared."³⁰

V

For Catholics like myself, who at some point in our lives escaped to the Catholic Church from the low horizon of Protestantism, these are discouraging times. It is disheartening to say the least to see the Church so infiltrated by the surrounding culture and so demoralized by the recent scandals that she is in danger of rejecting in her own life what is most decisively Catholic, and selling "for the sake of the mess of pottage of external Apostolic satisfaction" her deepest mysteries and highest privileges.³¹ To extend our earlier metaphors, Chesterton's chariot by this point has careened so far in one direction it has all but toppled over, and the ship that formerly drifted too close to the pole is now stuck in the doldrums of the equator, and in danger of corrupting there in the uninterrupted heat and light.

Ideally, in the Church's life, there is a continual interplay between marriage and celibacy, sensuality and asceticism, like the interplay in the Creation between heat and cold, day and night, light and darkness, and so on, all of which rhythmic oppositions, in their alternating times and seasons, *bless the Lord* (Dn 3:57–88). Even within marriage itself there were seasons of feasting and fasting, indulgence and abstinence, just as in the Church's traditional attitude to marriage there was idealism but also a healthy skepticism, romance but also a bracing note of sardonic realism ("better to marry than burn") that paradoxically served marriage well. In fact, it was by downplaying earthly marriage and ordering it to what was greater and eternal that the Church ensured marriage's health, tamped down unrealistic expectations and avoided placing on marriage a weight greater than it was intended to bear.

In our relational lives there is only one absolute good, and that is

³⁰ Traditional commentators (Origen, Hilary) have identified what cannot be shared in this parable with a person's good works, following Matthew 5:16: "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works. . . ." Yet it is not light that the wise virgins refuse to share, but the oil that makes light possible. As oil generates light, so God's grace fuels good works.

³¹ Von Balthasar, *Who Is a Christian?*, 85.

our relationship to God, a good denied to no one, lay or religious, who seeks it, prioritizes it, sacrifices for it, holds fast to it. Relative goods, on the other hand—including health and success, marriage and children—man cannot demand. God dispenses relative goods as he sees fit, in order to help man find his way to the final good of eternal life with him.

But in our culture, and increasingly in the Church itself, marriage is not regarded as a means but an end; it is not considered a relative but an absolute good, and therefore a right. The usual solution or sequel to widowhood or divorce in our day is not a late religious vocation or a salubrious solitude, but more marriage, or *more vengery* in Roger Angell's phrase in a recent essay in *The New Yorker*: "More vengery. More love; more closeness; more sex and romance. Bring it back, no matter what, no matter how old we are."³² In a climate like this—a climate for which the Church bears a certain responsibility, given her abuse of the grace of celibacy and her disproportionate enthusiasm for marriage—what does the Church say to homosexual persons who wish to marry? What does she say, for that matter, to the invalidly remarried who want to receive Eucharist and are dumbfounded by the suggestion that they forego sexual relations in order to do so? Should we be surprised that in a culture that so privileges marriage over celibacy, many Catholics now assume that the Eucharist is ordered to marriage rather than the other way around—that the choice for marriage is primary, in other words, and the Eucharist simply a secondary enhancement?

Once marriage is understood to be an absolute good and a right, it is very difficult to explain why, in certain circumstances, the goods of marriage have to be set aside. When the Church herself does not value celibacy at its true value, it is all but impossible to recommend celibacy to others. The less robust and exemplary the celibate example in the Church, the more the idea spreads that the choice for God costs nothing. The less celibacy is apprehended and lived as a grace, the more it begins to be thought of as a punishment.

In the long run, undervaluing celibacy is a suicidal path for the Church. But already certain individuals suffer grave harm from the depreciation. For the individual, nothing is more important than the

³² Roger Angell, "This Old Man: Life in the Nineties," *New Yorker*, February 17 & 24, 2014, 65.

choice of vocation. Nothing is more important than that he find his true path in life, the path that God has marked out for him. When a vocation is correctly discerned, even its most formidable challenges can be met; when mistaken, even its ordinary burdens may prove hard to bear. Accordingly, one of the most important responsibilities of the Church is to help individuals discern their vocations. But in a time like the present, when at best an equivalency is assumed between marriage and celibacy, and at worst, celibacy is implicitly or even explicitly devalued, what happens to the individual who is actually called to celibate priesthood or religious life? How is his capacity to respond to God's call—especially the call to sacrifice sexual goods—affected by a widespread insinuation that such a sacrifice is unnecessary, that there is no special benefit to celibacy, and as far as sanctity goes, as good a result can be had from marriage?

At this point, we have entered what von Balthasar calls “the zone of the ambivalent,” in which people offer to God things good in themselves, but not the things God has actually asked of them. Such evasions are perennial temptations for the Christian. Indeed, one could paint the whole history of Christianity as “the history of all the things [Christians] offer to God as substitutes in order to escape the act of real faith.”³³ But the question here is whether the Church in our day is enabling and even encouraging such evasions, by not telling the whole truth about vocations.³⁴

VI

In the past, in Christian cultures, there was a paradigmatic movement

³³ Von Balthasar, *Who Is a Christian?*, 76.

³⁴ Inevitably, evasions lead to evasions, as one lie necessitates another. Among Catholics who have missed or evaded a vocation to celibacy, some will become especially vehement proponents of marriage and lay life, even to the point of resenting the celibate hierarchy. In his *A Short Primer for Unsettled Laymen* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), von Balthasar notes the appearance after Vatican II of an “intermediate state” in the Church, the state of the lay male theologian. “Without doubt, there were true laymen among them who wanted to give . . . service to the Church. But there were certainly just as many who would in earlier times have decided to become priests, and who for this reason often enough harbored resentments against the clerical state and perpetuated its sociological and, as far as possible, theological secularization” (12).

that one could trace—in the collective psyche if not across actual terrain—from the world to the monastery. In our time, the paradigmatic movement has been from the monastery to the world. Following the general migration in the Church, various novels and memoirs have followed individuals from religion to lay life: Cathryn Hulme's 1956 novel *The Nun's Story*, for example; or Karen Armstrong's 1981 memoir *Through the Narrow Gate*; or Colum McCann's 2009 novel *Let the Great World Spin*, in which a male character who has taken religious vows is eventually brought to bed by a woman. On the face of it, these are narratives that reject the austerities of religion. But on a deeper level they turn out to be spiritual tragedies, their predominant note not one of triumphalism, but of sadness.³⁵ Even in a culture like our own, in which the propaganda runs all one way, the ideals of religious life, like the virgin martyrs themselves, turn out to be hard to kill.

In the treasury of the Catholic Church, the whole truth abides. All truth has been entrusted to the Church, according to Jesus's promise (Jn 16:13). Whether or not a given truth finds expression in a particular time or place is not finally important. What is important is that neglected truths remain in the Church's treasury, like recessive genes, waiting for favorable conditions or an auspicious hour in which to express themselves.

The wait may be long. Blessed John Henry Newman, in an 1850 sermon on the occasion of the restoration of the Catholic Hierarchy in England, described a wait of three hundred years. But when the three hundred years were over, "the Church came forth not changed in aspect or voice, as calm and keen, as vigorous and as well-furnished as when [the prison doors] closed on her."³⁶

³⁵ "Never," Karen Armstrong writes about her last days in the convent, "had the ideal seemed more beautiful than it did now I was outside it all, waiting for my dispensation. . . . Kneeling there that day, fighting with my tears, I knew [that] always some part of me, perhaps the deepest part . . . would love this ideal and mourn its loss. In one sense, vows or no vows, I should be a nun all my life." *Through the Narrow Gate* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 360. Even an author like Colum McCann, who evinces little interest in formal religion, kills off his lapsed Jesuit immediately after he sleeps with a woman, as if admitting the impossibility of his reverting to lay life. *Let the Great World Spin* (New York: Random House, 2009).

³⁶ Bl. John Henry Newman, "Christ upon the Water," in *Favorite Newman Sermons*, ed. Daniel M. O'Connell, S.J. (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1932), 82.

In the Church's treasury, along with other neglected truths, the truth of the preeminence of her celibate vocations is still there. It is there in the relevant Church documents, for anyone and everyone to read. It is there in Catholic literature and in the example and writings of the saints. It is there in the story of Jane de Chantal, who famously stepped over her own son on her way to founding the Visitation Order, or the example of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, who, like many others in the Church's history, took a vow of celibacy during their marriage.³⁷ It is there in the *sensus fidei*, or "supernatural sense of faith" of the whole people of God, under the guidance of which the laity in our day beatified by acclamation (*Santo subito!*), not lay or married people as the Congregation for the Causes of Saints might have preferred,³⁸ but John Paul II and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a celibate priest and a celibate nun.

Meanwhile, popes are still teaching, still expounding, in fresh ways, the age-old truths of Christianity. In his first *Jesus of Nazareth* volume, Pope Benedict XVI engaged in dialogue with a certain Jacob Neusner, a Jewish scholar and rabbi who, in his own book, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, imagined himself a contemporary and interlocutor of Jesus who ultimately rejects Christianity on account of certain things Jesus says. Among other sayings of Jesus, Neusner rejects those that threaten the natural family: for example, "I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother" (Mt 10:35), or "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and moth-

³⁷ Raïssa Maritain, in her *Journal*, describes the struggle to ascend from one level of life to another:

What must be removed from human love . . . is not the love itself: no, what must be suppressed, or rather surpassed, is the limits of the heart. Hence the suffering—in this effort to go beyond our narrow limits. For in these limits, in *our* limits, is *our* human joy.

But we have to go beyond these limits of the heart; we have, under the action of grace and through the travail of the soul, to leave our bounded heart for the boundless heart of God. . . . It is only when one has accepted this death that one enters, resurrected, into the boundless heart of God with all that one loves, with all the spoils of love . . . (239).

³⁸ When it became clear, as the Year of the Laity drew to a close, that the campaign to identify more lay and married saints had borne little fruit, some members of the Congregation in Rome blamed the laity. See Kenneth Woodward's conversation with Fr. Peter Gumpel in *Making Saints* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 343–44.

er” (Mt 10:50). According to Neusner, Jesus would have him break the commandments—the fourth commandment, in these cases, to honor father and mother—and by placing the family in jeopardy, threatens the very foundation of Israel.³⁹

In his response to Neusner, Benedict does not apologize for these controversial scriptures, which, as we have seen, discomfit many contemporary Catholics as well as Jews. Instead, he reaffirms and rehabilitates them as fundamental to Christianity. Ostensibly arguing with Neusner, Benedict speaks to the whole Church, reminding her “to pay careful attention to the connection between transcendence and fulfillment,” and arguing that while it is true that following Jesus does initially break up the social order of Israel, as in every age it can break up natural relationships and blood families, Jesus’s goal is not destruction. On the contrary, his goal is to reconstitute the family of Israel on a new and universal level, to bring the God of Israel to the nations:

The vehicle of this universalization is the new family, whose only admission requirement is communion with Jesus, communion in God’s will. . . . Communion with [Jesus] is filial communion with the Father—it is yes to the fourth commandment on a new level, the highest level. It is entry into the family of those who call God Father. . . .⁴⁰

For anyone who has suffered from tribalism of any kind—from the terrible things sometimes done in the name of the family—Jesus’s promise of a new family, that lives under a new sign, is one of the most enduring attractions of Christianity.

Finally and most consistently, the truth about the evangelical counsels is there in the scriptures themselves, proclaimed every day at Mass, as the cycles of readings require. Year in and year out, whether convenient or inconvenient, whether faithfully expounded or passed over in embarrassment, the relevant scriptures are read—“Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead” (Mt 8:22); “It is well . . . to remain sin-

³⁹ Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), 35–72.

⁴⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 117, 120. For Benedict’s whole response to Neusner, see 99–122.

gle" (1 Cor 7:8); "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have and give to the poor" (Mk 10:21)—and men and women respond, in diminishing numbers for many years, but now again in greater strength. The Dominican Order in particular is experiencing a surge in vocations, and on a recent Sunday in my parish a newly ordained Dominican priest preached unapologetically about the priesthood—about its greatness, surpassing other calls—and in the pews there was an electric silence, even a tearful silence, as this neglected truth, hidden away for many years, came out of the Church's treasury unchanged.

Relative to the laity, priests and religious will always be few, even where vocations increase. It is inevitable that they be few, because the demands placed on the celibate are beyond the reach of most men. "As regards the common body of men, Christianity is *human* in the sense that it accepts men in their weakness and inconstancy and also in their nature attached to natural goods."⁴¹ Yet it is on the example of the few that the rest of the Church depends: for the sacraments, in the case of the priest, but also for a visible witness to the contemplative foundation of every Christian existence.⁴² We live in a world where Freudian ideas still hold sway, including the idea that religion is a sublimation of sex. The celibate, by his example, proposes a truth exactly opposite: that every other love, every lesser love, is a sublimated form of the love of God.

In the greatest saints, these sublimated forms fade away into the mysterious, unmediated brightness of God himself. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina was not a philosopher like John Paul II or a lawyer like Thomas More; he was not a teacher like Elizabeth Anne Seton or a subtle theologian like Thérèse of Lisieux. He was a priest, an *alter Christus* even to the wounds in his hands, feet and side; most at home on the altar, saying Mass, or in the confessional, forgiving sin. Coarse and unsophisticated as he was, in his person the vertical of the cross—the love of God above all created things—was manifest. Writing to a friend after a visit to San Giovanni Rotondo monastery, Don Giuseppe De Luca, an Italian historian of Christian spirituality, shared his dazed impressions of the wounded friar:

⁴¹ Maritain, *Raissa's Journal*, 369.

⁴² Von Balthasar, *Who Is a Christian?*, 84.

Padre Pio, dear Papini, is a sickly, ignorant Capuchin, very much the crude Southerner. And yet (bear in mind that besides making confession to him, I also dined with him and we spent a great deal of time together), and yet—God is with him, that fearful God that we glimpse in revery and which he has in his soul, unbearably hot, and in his flesh, which trembles constantly, wounded, sometimes more, sometimes less . . . as if battered by ever more powerful gales. I truly saw the *holy* there, holiness not of action but of passion. . . . Although he is a man of very meager intelligence, he offered me two or three words that I have never found on the lips of other men, and not even (and this is harder to admit) in the books of the Church. There is nothing of ordinary spirituality about him, nor is there anything extraordinarily miraculous, stunning, or showy; there is merely *intelligentia spiritualis*, a free gift from God. And there is a passion, even a human passion, for God, dear Papini, that is so beautiful, so ravishingly sweet that I can't tell you. The love of woman and the love of ideas are nothing by comparison, they are things that do not go beyond a certain point, whether near or far. While the love of God, how I do not know, burns, and the more it burns the more it finds to burn. I have the absolute certain sensation that God and man have met in this person.⁴³

N&V

⁴³ Sergio Luzzatto, *Padre Pio: Miracles and Politics in a Secular Age*, trans. Frederika Randall (New York: Henry Holt, 2010), 182–83.

