

Ethics and Forgiveness | The Problem of Hierarchy

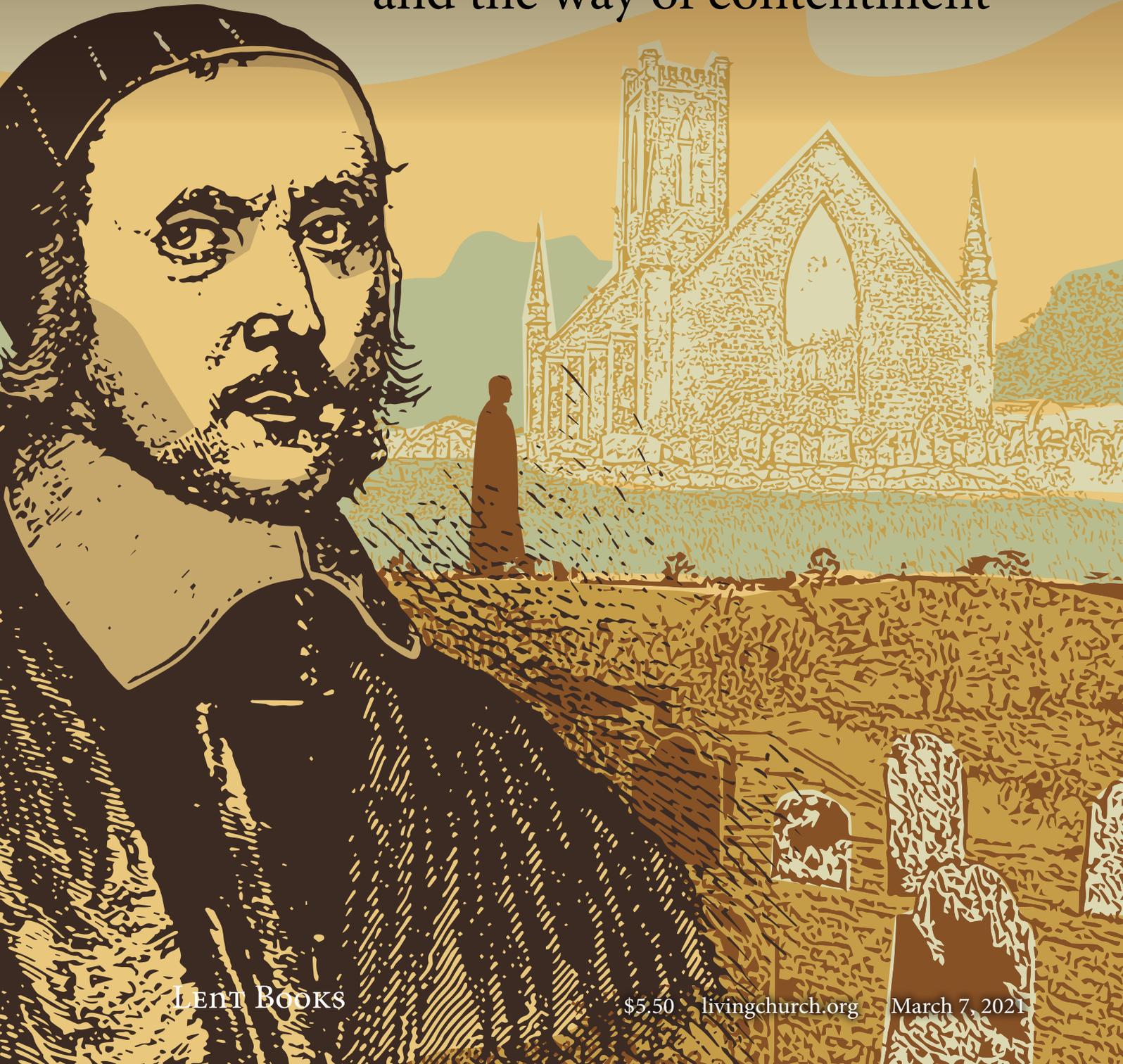
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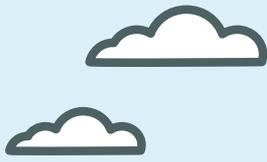
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Jeremy Taylor and the way of contentment



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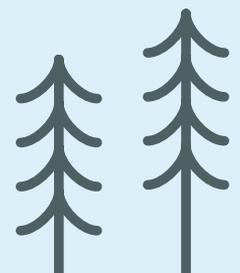


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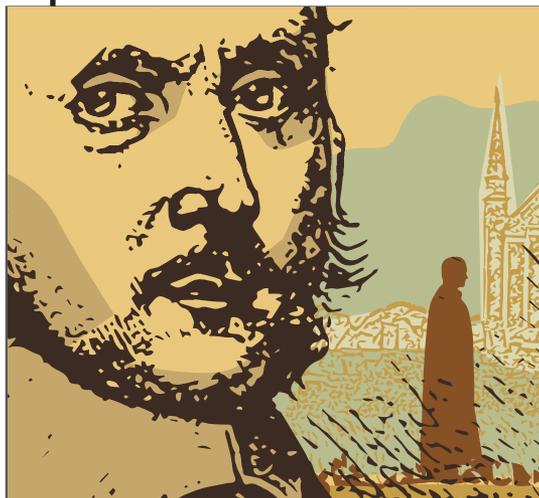
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ON THE COVER

Jeremy Taylor admonishes us not to compare our condition with those in more advantageous circumstances, but instead to notice those who would gladly exchange their place for ours (see p. 12).

Geoff Strehlow illustration



Lambeth 2022 to Focus on Peter’s First Epistle

By Mark Michael

The First Epistle of Peter, a text that speaks to “immediate pastoral problems” and raises “an utterly compelling and inspiring vision of the call of God” will be the focus of the 2022 Lambeth Conference, Archbishop Justin Welby said in a video introduction launched in early February on the conference’s website.

The epistle helps the Church grapple with real-life issues like “climate change, conflict, gender, identity, modern slavery, poverty,” Welby said. “Many of our sisters and brothers experience these pressures on a daily basis. And when we meet in Canterbury, we must listen to the voices, to the testimonies, to each other.”

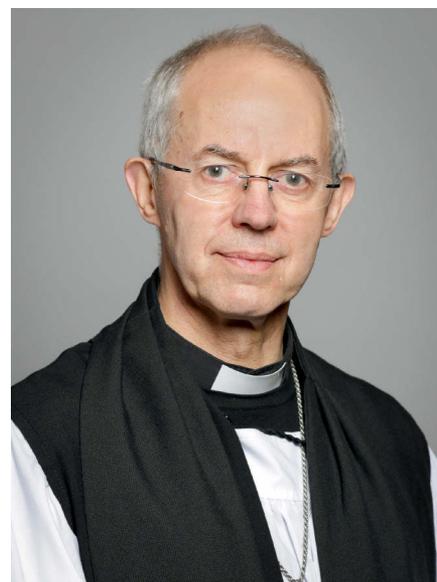
“The focus on the Bible and 1 Peter in particular, really will drive much of the Lambeth Conference and has been a huge part of the preparation for it,” said the Rev. Canon Jennifer Strawbridge, who plays a central role in developing Bible studies for the bishops who will gather in Canterbury in the summer of 2022.

Strawbridge, an Episcopal priest and professor of New Testament studies at Oxford, noted that 1 Peter was the

archbishop’s choice, which he believed “would speak deeply to the Anglican Communion.” Strawbridge serves as convener of the St. Augustine Seminar, 35 New Testament scholars from 17 countries who gathered at Lambeth Palace in November 2018 to study the text together.

The seminar, funded by a charitable body linked to Canterbury Cathedral, produced a commentary on the epistle, which was published in February 2020, and will be given to all conference participants. In a recent review for *Covenant*, Nick Moore praised the commentary, which aims to reflect the seminar’s work by ensuring that “different approaches to Scripture are brought together in such a way that difference is not hidden, and the conversation continues.”

Eight seminar participants joined Strawbridge in presenting video reflections on each of 1 Peter’s five chapters, as well as some difficult themes it surfaces, part of the “Journey to Lambeth” preparation announced by Welby in July 2020. In most of the ten-minute videos, speakers summarize the text, consider its relevance for the Church today, and discuss how they find it challenging and helpful.



Archbishop Welby

Strawbridge sketches her hopes for the bishops’ shared time of study: “It’s when we draw together a group that is diverse, that has a number of voices that are all engaging Scripture together — by reading Scripture together, by praying Scripture together — we’ll be better able to listen to each other’s stories. We’ll be better able then, by hearing one another ... to face the many challenges that this Communion and individuals within it [experience], and to stand in solidarity and walk together. The ultimate hope is that we, as a Communion, will be able to witness together to the transforming hope that we find in Christ and particularly in the text of 1 Peter.”

The video “Reflections on Chapter 1” gathers presentations by the Rt. Rev. Samy Shehata, Bishop Coadjutor of Egypt (and a member of the Living Church Foundation), and the Rev. Canon Maurice Elliott, principal of the Church of Ireland Theological College. After considering the dangers faced by the congregations Peter addresses, Shehata reflects on his experience as a church leader in Egypt.

“There are some difficulties, and yet

The screenshot shows the Living Church website's podcast section. At the top, it says "LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST" with the Living Church and Anchor logos. Below that, a banner reads "RECENTLY ON THE LIVING CHURCH PODCAST". Three episodes are featured:

- Livingchurch.org/podcast**: A red and white graphic with the Living Church logo.
- Prayer in the Night**: A portrait of Tish Harrison Warren. Description: "Tish Harrison Warren on grief, pain, and praying Compline".
- Living in Love and Faith, Unpacked**: A portrait of Andrew Goddard. Description: "Andrew Goddard on the COE's marriage & sexuality project".

we receive many blessings,” he said. “We have challenges on different levels, social challenges as the Christians are a minority. ... As a Christian, if you want to serve the Lord in any society, you are bound to have problems and conflicts, so Peter speaks directly to us as we are serving the Lord in our communities today.”

The Rev. Katherine Sonderegger, professor of systematic theology at Virginia Theological Seminary, said that the epistle’s third chapter, which exhorts wives to submit to their husbands, included “texts that, to my 21st-century ears, are startling to read.”

But after further reflection, Sonderegger admitted discovering anew that “Scripture is fully realistic about what it is like to live in a world that we don’t control, but it shapes us. That can be as true in our friendships, in our marriage, as it is in our work life, in our existence as citizens of a particular nation. The question that Scripture asks us to consider here, that I have learned to take seriously, is: how is it possible to live under structures and, perhaps, under people we don’t control and shape, and yet under those conditions we return blessing and testify to hope, even in the midst of that?”

The University of Botswana’s Musa Wenkosi Dube reflected passionately on the need for the Communion’s bishops, as shepherds, to confront lions that threaten their flocks. In the video “Reflections on Chapter 5,” she urged bishops to model “non-hierarchical, inclusive leadership,” and to recognize that “Jesus is radical.”

“We cannot preach the good news where people are still in poverty, women are still oppressed, people are disabled and don’t have access to our economy or to any institutions, some members still don’t find a space in our worship and in our communities because of their sexualities,” she said. “That is not the gospel. The gospel must be good news to us, and to all members of our earth community, including to the earth itself.”

In another video, Canon Esther Mombo of St. Paul’s University in Limuru, Kenya, and Dr. Kwok Pui Lan, a Chinese feminist theologian who teaches at Candler Theological Semi-

nary, discussed 1 Peter’s application to marital relationships, immigration, and hospitality.

Mombo said the book’s call to servant leadership points in a helpful direction. “I think if we take the metaphor of shepherding, it will actually enlarge our understanding in regard to patriarchy, in regard to immigration, in regard to hospitality,

because that’s the heart of Jesus.”

She added: “I think 1 Peter ends very well and I think we should embrace it because it will bring a society that is accepting, a society that will be inclusive. I like that metaphor. I really like it because it dismantles that hierarchy, power, and patriarchy. And for me, it’s like ‘Yes, that’s what we should embrace.’”

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COVID Creates Uncertainty in Virginia

By Kirk Petersen

Add one more item to the list of problems created by the pandemic: difficulty passing a budget.

On Feb. 5, Bishop Susan Goff of the Diocese of Virginia called for a special convention in April for the sole purpose of passing a budget for the current year. The unusual move comes after the regular annual diocesan convention in November was unable to enact a budget.

Nancy Chafin, director of communications, told *TLC* that the draft budget in November was based on anticipated cuts in giving by parishes, and “reflected cuts in virtually every area,” with the exception of racial-justice work. “After an extended discussion of the proposed budget where delegates advocated for increased funding in multiple areas, the convention was unable to reach consensus,” she said.

The matter was referred back to the Executive Board, consisting of the bishop and 16 lay or clerical members selected for the 16 regions of the diocese, which roughly encompasses the northeastern third of the state. The board approved a schedule of payments to be made during the first quarter of 2021, while the board met twice to decide how to proceed.

After discussion and prayer, “I have determined that a Special Convention will provide an opportunity for the greatest clarity, transparency and engagement with the budget process for the entire diocese,” the bishop announced.

Goff signs her messages as “Bishop Suffragan and Ecclesiastical Authority,” which also is unusual. She has held that role since the November 2018 retirement of Shannon Johnston, the XIII Bishop of Virginia.

In recent history, when a bishop retires without an elected successor, a retired bishop with experience leading a diocese has served as a bishop provi-

sional for time. But the diocese could not identify a suitable candidate who met all the criteria and was willing to move to Virginia.

Bishop Goff, who has served as bishop suffragan since 2012, inherited the additional role of ecclesiastical authority. Large dioceses often elect a bishop suffragan to serve, without right of succession, under the bishop diocesan.

The Diocese of Virginia has 167 congregations and is the second-largest diocese in the Episcopal Church, based on pre-pandemic average Sunday attendance, behind only the Diocese of Texas.

While the November convention was unable to pass a budget, it did approve the formation of a committee to find the XIV Bishop of the Diocese of Virginia, which was founded in 1785 as one of the original dioceses of the nascent Episcopal Church.

The mandatory retirement age for a priest or bishop is 72, and Goff, 67, has made clear she will not be a candidate for diocesan bishop. “We anticipate an election and consecration sometime in 2022,” she told the convention. “It will be an honor to work with the next bishop diocesan for a time before I retire.”

Leaked C of E Paper Warns of Possible Woes

By Mark Michael

An internal discussion paper leaked to the press warns of the possibility of major cash shortfalls, significant attendance drops, and “indiscriminate cuts” to paid clergy posts in the post-COVID Church of England.

Perspectives on Money, People and Buildings, a document prepared by the vision and strategy group for the church led by the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, was distributed to the

church's bishops and diocesan secretaries on January 18. The *Sunday Times* broke the story on January 31, under the headline "Church to Cut Paid Clergy as a Fifth of Flock Wanders Off."

Cottrell disputed the characterization in a BBC Radio *Sunday* interview: "It is much too early to write headlines like this. ... Yes, this is a financially challenging time for the Church, as it is for all organizations, but there are no central plans to cut clergy. Even if there were, we couldn't do it. ... That is not how the Church of England operates."

Yet the paper issued with a cover letter by Cottrell sketches a picture of a church deeply shaken by pandemic-related changes.

Based on financial reporting, survey data, and discussions among the bishops, the paper confirmed that the inability to gather for worship has been very costly. As of November 2020, parish-share income, the assessments paid by parishes to dioceses, had fallen by 8.1 percent. It predicts a further fall of 10 percent for 2021, though this estimate may be conservative, coming before the current round of strict lockdowns. Pandemic-related cost savings are estimated at only 2 to 3 percent.

The drop in parish-share income also varies considerably between dioceses, and has generally fallen harder on dioceses in the north. The largest fall was 17.8 percent, and one diocese saw an increase of 0.5 percent income over 2019.

"Churches which have a solid foundation of regular giving through direct debit or standing order appear to be withstanding the pandemic much better than those more dependent on church hall income, visitor donations and cash in the offertory plate," it said.

The paper cited the growth in online worship as a success, noting that "the pandemic created opportunities for the Church to engage with new people." Surveys conducted during England's first nationwide lockdown estimated that 200,000 to 300,000 people who were new to church or had attended irregularly participated in "Church at Home" offerings, and that 100,000 to 200,000 planned to continue joining online or in-person worship.

Just as many regular churchgoers,

however, said they are "not planning to return to worship in any form" in the future. The survey suggests the church's post-pandemic worshipping community will number between 1 and 1.2 million, and that 160,000 to 200,000 of these would be online-only.

"The Church of England could emerge from the pandemic smaller in terms of engagement by at least some measures, but particularly physical attendance," the paper said. "This will inevitably have further impact on the sustainability of many local churches."

The paper noted that the Church of England had survived decades of sustained decline because "its historic assets have been large enough to enable it to subsidize parishes which cannot afford their ministry costs and by steadily reducing the number of stipendiary ministers."

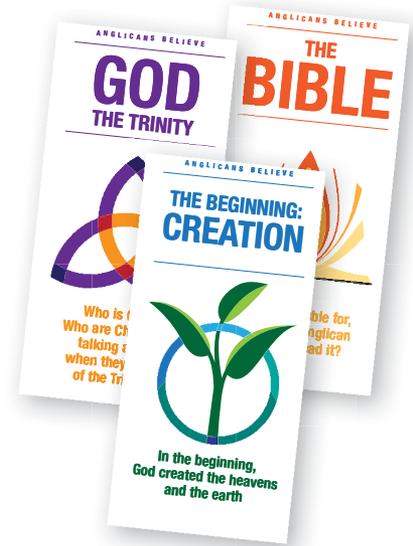
Similar reductions are likely for the future, like those already announced in Cottrell's former cash-strapped Diocese of Chelmsford and in Sodor and Man. The paper noted that clergy spending across the church is projected to be down 4 percent in 2021, and that "dioceses are making provision for reduced numbers of clergy in almost all cases."

The paper cites opportunities for deep reform presented by the pandemic, while also hinting at painful differences about the best means of recovery.

"Many diocesan leaders believe that the financial challenges being exposed by the pandemic mean this is the moment to embark on radical changes to re-shape existing resource patterns and ministry structures, and to invest in developing a more missionally healthy and financially sustainable Church," the paper said. "But there is not a consensus about that: some don't see a need for radical change or have the appetite to undertake it; some suggest that changes will have little impact."

Briefly

The nine-member steering committee of Communion Partners met by video conference Jan. 11-15 and reiterated the group's concern about the Episcopal Church's treatment of the Rt. Rev.



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The Living Church is pleased to announce the release of **the Anglicans Believe** collection of pamphlets.

Anglicans Believe is a new series of pamphlets developed by the editors and contributing writers of The Living Church. The collection is focused on classic topics in Christian teaching, such as the Holy Trinity, the Eucharist and faith in Christ.

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William Love, IX Bishop of Albany. “We continue to take issue with the perceived arbitrary nature of disciplinary actions such as these, which extends latitude to some in the enforcement of canons, but not to others,” the committee said.

Christopher Wells, executive director and publisher of the Living Church, is a committee member.

The Anglican Communion Office’s work for **gender justice** will continue until the next full meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council, scheduled for 2023. “The Church has been slow to address these issues”, said Mandy Marshall, new director of the project. “Female Christian survivors, including clergy wives, have often typically been ignored, sidelined, or told to keep quiet for the sake of the ministry of the Church.

In other ACO news, the **Rev. William Adam** will become deputy secretary general in addition to his role as director of unity, faith, and order. “There is no one better than Will to help lead the Anglican Communion’s global work of building relationships, seeking peace and calling for justice,” Archbishop Justin Welby said.

Washington Bishop **Mariann Budde** and Washington National Cathedral Dean **Randy Hollerith** issued apologies Feb. 10 for screening a video sermon by Church of Christ pastor Max Lucado. Lucado’s sermon for the cathedral’s Feb. 7 livestreamed service included did not refer to marriage or sexuality. In 2004, Lucado expressed his opposition to same-sex marriage and compared it to legalizing polygamy, bestiality, or incest.

Bishop Gene Robinson was celebrant at the service, and he stressed that LGBT causes will prevail. In a letter to the cathedral community, Lucado apologized for the tone of his remarks of 17 years ago. Lucado wrote. “I wounded people in ways that were devastating,” Lucado wrote. “It grieves me that my words have hurt or been used to hurt the LGBTQ community. I apologize to you and I ask forgiveness of Christ.”

The Episcopal Church celebrated the 10th anniversary of its agreement of full communion with the Northern and Southern provinces of the **Moravian Church in America** at a virtual ceremony Feb. 10.

“Our relationship as Moravians and Episcopalians could be looked at as just a nice church thing, but it is more than that,” Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said in his sermon. “It is a sign. It is a witness. It is a yearning for what God yearns, not simply for the church but for the entire human family.”

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Cæli enarrant

Church Order: Neither Nostalgic nor Progressive

This is the first of three reflections on hierarchy.

By Christopher Wells

We denizens of democratic spaces do not much like rulers. We like, in the formulation of the French Revolution, *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*. We worry, with historical reason, that those who rule do so either by lineage or by fiat, both of which seem morally suspect as they remain unaccountable. How to reform a sovereign power when it has become lazy, corrupt, or simply second-rate? How to avoid the inevitable domination of kings, popes, and primates when they are given, or otherwise accumulate, too much power?

These questions touch on the problem of authority but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, on the problem of hierarchy: an interesting and ancient concept with a long political, religious, and theological history. In contemporary usage, *hierarchy* denotes the ranking of one above another in status or authority, and we commonly associate it with inherited systems of patronage and privilege. The liberal-democratic mind leaps to the Vatican, the military, and other forms of authoritarianism, underwritten by an all-too-tenacious patriarchy. *Hierarchy* passed into English from Old French and Latin but is Greek in origin, combining *hieros*, meaning sacred, and *arkhēs* or *arché*, meaning ruler. The English *hierarch* captures this. Orthodox Christians refer to bishops as *hierarchs* with reference to their authority, as distinct from analogous honorifics such as *archpriest* and *archdeacon*.

Of course, western Christians know all about bishops and archbishops, and both these offices and their incumbents have often dramatized our ambivalence about authority and its associated powers. Simplifying only slightly, since the 16th-century Reformation, the Roman Catholic problem has been knowing who is in charge and worrying about it, while the Protestant problem has been not knowing who is in charge and worrying about it. Anglicans, falling somewhat accidentally in the middle, have faithfully reflected the indecision of all sides. In the Anglican Communion era, at least (from 1867 on), we are ever weighing pros and cons, consulting, starting to speak, and retreating again to the study. Muddling through.

Witness our latest considerations of the proper place and authority of the Primates' Meeting, the instrument of communion of most recent vintage (1978) that seems bound to cause problems as it gathers the *first* or *prime* — in almost every case, *arch* — bishops to talk with one another. They may decide to do more than talk, which is the worry. Suc-

cessive drafts of the Anglican Covenant mostly focused on the question of how decisions should be made and by whom, and its storied Section IV saw the most rewriting. First the primates, then the Anglican Consultative Council, and finally a standing committee of both primates and the ACC were asked to decide what to do in hard cases. The Covenant is on ice, but the standing committee of the ACC soldiers on with one and another task, while the problem of structured authority and decision-making — also of bishops more broadly, as at the Lambeth Conference, and of the Archbishop of Canterbury — is deferred, for now.

The question of how best to structure the universal Church, and local churches, is a good one, and I do not propose to resolve it here. I will, in a second column, sketch something of the scriptural pattern of order, writ in trinitarian terms. But naming our context and questions is critical on the way to self-understanding. I take it that harnessing one of the oldest of Christian institutions, a variegated episcopate, more or less tops the list of ecclesiological errands before *all* the churches of Christendom. The World Council of Churches' landmark *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982) concluded as much in its retrieval of a scriptural oversight (*episcopé*) for all, and several Protestant traditions, including Lutherans and Methodists, have made adoption of the historic episcopate a primary point of possible development worth considering.

As an ordered pattern of administration and leadership that antedates the Dark Ages, the countercultural character of episcopal office seems more apparent to contemporary commentators. We sometimes forget that all sides in the 16th century found a place for reform, and the work has continued to today in perennial councils, synods, conventions, and special meetings that seek wise governance, led by the Spirit. In each case, we try both to apprehend the past and to leave room for adjustments, additions, and subtractions. All churches, including the Roman Catholic, are seeking some way in which sundry primates, archbishops and presiding bishops, and other designated overseers may sit alongside a representative group of others down the proverbial chain of command but no less empowered to speak or deserving attention. If, in this work, reflexive romanticism about the past remains a temptation — preserving in amber all that is old, never to be revised or revisited but only venerated — then its mirror impulse is presentist positivism, fed by something like amnesia or dementia: a wholesale replacing of the past with contemporary overconfidence. Both instincts tend to discourage dissent, and to decry the rain that historians inevitably conjure

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over parades of notional nostalgia and putative progress alike.

What we, the body of Christ, need at such times are ways and means to speak authentically together about the formative events — “what *was* from the beginning, what *we* have heard, what *we* have seen with our eyes, what *we* have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (1 John 1:1). If and as we throw in the towel on Christian knowing *per se* or deem identification with the first-person plural too difficult, disorientation sets in, and with it a loss of confidence in universality or objectivity of any sort. When truth is put on notice by competing ideologies of powerbrokers and manipulators, decrying “alternative facts” in service of their self-interest, *faith* — in one another, in common institutions, even in God — can appear naïve at best, manipulative at worst. We relinquish the gift and call of universal concern, catholicism in its true sense, by so many accidental and intentional apostasies.

Christians profess belief in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, against which the gates of hell will not prevail (Matt. 16:18). By this, we have held that the Holy Spirit of God animates the Church, even when the faith is lost, misarticulated, or betrayed in this or that place or instance for a time. God is faithful. Moreover, as a bond of love between times and places, God the Spirit, with the Father and the Son, serves as the first and final force in history, playing the lead role.

Is this drama in any sense hierarchical?

—Christopher Wells



COMMUNION ACROSS DIFFERENCE

Orlando Parishes Unite for Social Action

By Neva Rae Fox, Correspondent

When differences are bridged, similarities can often emerge. That’s what happened when two congregations on opposite sides of a major American city connected, resulting in community-wide activism allowing hidden voices to be finally heard.

In Orlando, Florida, Iglesia Episcopal Jesus de Nazaret and St. John the Baptist were operating and ministering separately, solely on their own. When Jesus de Nazaret vicar the Rev. Jose Rodriguez met up with St. John the Baptist rector the Rev. Charles Myers, they discovered common issues and goals, and developed a mutual drive for social activism. Differences in language, culture, and worship styles paved the bridge that connected them, allowing the two houses of worship to mesh for the common good.

“We connected the black and Latino community of Orlando,” Rodriguez said. “Jesus de Nazaret is a Latino community which didn’t have a permanent home.” He called the congregation a gathering of “displaced groups,” including people of color, immigrants, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans. “Jesus de Nazaret had Hispanic ministries that were pushed out of other churches,” he said. The parish now enjoys “a wonderful relationship with the Anglo parish of Christ the King,” which shares its property.

On the other side of the city of 280,000 people, St. John the Baptist

boasts a rich 125-year-old history as an African American church that has long been active in civil rights.

Myers, who is white, matched his experience in community organizing to Rodriguez’s zeal. Their combined efforts grew to address social activism, community issues, food sustainability, affordable housing, fair access to COVID-19 services, and language advocacy.

“He prods city commissioners, and I prod the county,” Rodriguez said with a smile.

The priests were quick to say the activism is something their parishes support. “I have a team of *abuelas* (grandmothers) with me,” Rodriguez said.

The joint results of the churches are substantial: Universal Orlando Resort, a major regional employer, agreed to “put aside land for affordable housing for their employees,” Rodriguez said.

“We worked for employee rights at Orlando International Airport, where many are minorities,” he added.

Another joint initiative focused on hospitality workers’ rights because Orlando is a major tourist area, and most of these workers are minorities.



Small group discussion is part of the joint ministry of Iglesia Episcopal Jesus de Nazaret and St. John the Baptist Church.

Since COVID-19 has affected their respective communities deeply, and the congregations now are focusing on the critical issues of testing and vaccine access. Rodriguez added that their first efforts resulted in COVID-19 information, previously available only in English, is now offered in Spanish and other languages.

They established relations and coalitions with other community groups.

“Orlando is where the Pulse Massacre was,” Rodriguez said.

The mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in 2016 left 49 people dead and 53 injured.

“The victims were mostly Hispanic and black,” Rodriguez said. The two churches led funerals and prayer vigils and “pushed for justice with the LGBT community.”

A food pantry at St. John’s was in wide demand, as needs exploded amid COVID-related business closures in

March 2020. “I asked the vestry to keep the food pantry open,” Myers said. “We did, and word spread quickly, including through social media. Now, the LGBTQ community

media. The two priests are often asked for statements and to participate in community forums on topical issues.

They both stressed, in two languages, that self-promotion is farthest

“Through media, our advocacy is introducing Jesus to people for the first time.”

—The Rev. Charles Myers

is helping us out with delivery.”

In the latest joint initiative, the two churches received a grant through Workforce Florida for a leadership development course for displaced workers because of COVID, to equip minority workers with skills needed in a post-pandemic marketplace.

Their efforts and results have gained the attention of local and regional news

from their minds; it’s the ministry that is important. “I do this for the advocacy,” Rodriguez said. “I keep it focused for Jesus.”

“Through media, our advocacy is introducing Jesus to people for the first time,” Myers said. “We are investing in people. We are inviting people. In our advocacy, we are doing evangelism and radical hospitality.” □

Contentedness in Hard Circumstances

Advice from Jeremy Taylor

By Charles Hoffacker

The life of Jeremy Taylor (1613-67) was anything but easy. This Caroline Divine lived through decades of uproar, remaining a consistent Anglican and Royalist throughout the English Civil War, Protectorate, and Restoration. Taylor served as a chaplain to Archbishop William Laud and King Charles I, both of whom were executed, and was himself briefly imprisoned several times.

He spent years in exile at Golden Grove, the home of his patron Lord Carbery in Wales. He buried his first wife and several sons. After the Restoration, he served as a bishop in rural

Ireland. His large, learned, and elegant literary legacy includes *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*. Jeremy Taylor is honored on August 13 in some provinces of the Anglican Communion.

Thomas K. Carroll notes that Taylor's *Holy Living* "has all the marks of an unconscious biography." Motivated perhaps by his many sorrows, Taylor included an extensive discourse on contentedness (Chapter II, Section VI) that, along with other resources, features eight "Instruments or Exercises to procure Contentedness" in the belief that chance or circumstance cannot overcome someone who is content.

The first exercise involves recognizing that "everything has two handles," or at least that we have two hands by which to grasp it. What troubles us can be turned to our spiritual advantage. An enemy who reproaches us may supply a more helpful account of our faults than any friend. While a support-

er may flatter us, an opponent teaches us how to proceed with caution. Medicine that tastes bitter may contribute to the renewal of health.

If nothing else, our misfortunes in life "may make us weary of the world's vanity, and take off our confidence from uncertain riches; and make our spirits to dwell in those regions where content dwells essentially."

Taylor admonishes us not to compare our condition with those in more advantageous circumstances, but instead to notice those who would gladly exchange their place for ours. To grieve over the good that others enjoy is a folly rather than to rejoice in the good that God has graciously bestowed upon us.

He then appeals to our natural self-love. Wise or good people never wish to exchange their identity or circumstances entirely for those of others. We may desire some specific good en-



joyed by another. There is “no reason to take the finest feathers from all the winged nation to deck that bird that thinks already she is more valuable” than any other.

Sometimes we must shift our attention from losses and grievances and instead consider what pleases and prospers us. Then what is better blots out what is worse. Recall blessings you have received, and imagine blessings likely to appear. “It may be that thou art entered into the cloud which will bring a gentle shower to refresh thy sorrows.”

Taylor encourages Christians to reflect on what salvation promises them: “how great is that joy, how infinite is that change, how unspeakable is the glory, how excellent is the recompence for all the sufferings in the world.” Because we are but strangers traveling to our country, where the kingdom’s glories wait for us, it would be folly to be much concerned about having “a less convenient inn to lodge in by the way.”

We are advised not to sit upon our little handful of thorns. Taylor seems to imply that, even while he is exiled at Golden Grove, his life is still rich. “I sleep and digest, I eat and drink, I read and meditate, I can walk in my neighbor’s pleasant fields, and see the varieties of natural beauties, and delight in all that in which God delights, that is, in virtue and wisdom, in the whole creation, and in God himself.”

Taylor’s fourth exercise cautions us to “avoid solicitude about the future.” Engaging in such misguided concern “is like refusing to quench your present thirst by fearing you may” lack drink the next day. Sorrows come soon enough, so enjoy today’s blessings and bear today’s evils with patience. Taylor quotes Christ: “Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof” (Matt. 6:34), noting that this evil is sufficient, not intolerable.

Another exercise is to prepare our minds for changes, always expecting them. Even when our fortunes undergo violent change, our spirits may remain content if they stand “in the suburbs and expectation of sorrows.” This exercise is illustrated by a contrast between the rich man who promised himself “ease and fulfillment for many years,” yet lost his fortune to death that very night (Luke 12:16-21), and the apostles “who every day knock at the gate of death.”

The troubles we now experience would appear as a welcome relief if we returned to them from a more desperate situation. If a toothache were added to our troubles, then those troubles would seem attractive by comparison. God has given us blessings, the absence of which we would feel more keenly than the difficulty we now lament. The blessings we already enjoy “deserve the thanksgiving of a whole life,” regardless of whether we recognize them. Gratitude for these gifts can heal us of discontent.

To secure and maintain contentment, Taylor advises, “you must measure your desires by your fortune and condition, not your fortunes by your desires.” Be governed by what you need, not by what you want. It is as easy to quench thirst from a full pitcher as from a flowing river. We make trouble for ourselves through appetites that do not originate with God or nature, whereas God and nature make no more ends than they mean to satisfy.”

The final exercise is to “take sanctuary in religion” whenever we are afflicted. The anchors that secure our souls does not keep us from storm, but from shipwreck. When we suffer in a good cause, then with St. Paul let us say, “We are troubled on every side, but not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor. 4:8). While contentment requires virtue, virtue does not depend on good or bad fortune. To have God’s friendship is everything.

The way of contentment is challenging. Reliable guidance proves valuable.

From his difficult life in the 17th century, Jeremy Taylor speaks words of guidance to help us live contentedly in our time, whatever our hardships may be.

The Rev. Charles Hoffacker, an Episcopal priest, lives in Greenbelt, Maryland.

The Theology of Agatha Christie Touches the Public Soul



Wikimedia Commons

By Leonard Freeman

Agatha Christie, a lifelong member of the Church of England, kept her mother's copy of *The Imitation of Christ* on her bedside throughout her life. That image provides an important clue to why her mysteries were so appealing and challenging. Her Christian presuppositions shaped the elements that made her mysteries different from the run of the mill, her work touching something significant in the public soul.

In the 100 years since the publication of her first book, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in 1920, Agatha Christie's literary empire has produced more than two billion books in 44 languages, 66 detective novels, 14 short stories, and the longest continuously running play in history, *The Mousetrap*.

The secret to Agatha Christie lies at least partly in her theological presuppositions, her underlying assumptions about human nature, original sin, and moral choice. They differ from the traditional formula of detective fiction.

Fiction writers, by definition, have to play God to tell a story. They must create a universe, populate it, establish basic pattern of relationships, and present that world's possibilities, dangers, and hopes. Most popular writers do that by formula, presenting a repetitive, familiar statement of reality that readers unconsciously accept.

The classic detective story rules are not that tricky. The reader should have the clues, the detective should be the hero, good and evil should be represented by the detective and the culprit, and good should win the day. Evil should not stand unpunished.

Christie, on the other hand, while staying well within the genre, regularly broke those rules and expectations because of her beliefs. Along with wonderful plotting skill, therein lay the core of her genius.

Human Nature

Christie's novels, particularly the Jane Marple stories, are often set in "the kind of village where nothing ever happens, exactly like a stagnant pond" (*Sleeping Murder*, 1976), which makes Miss Marple a super sleuth, "just the finest detective God ever made" (*A Murder Is Announced*, 1950).

"Living in a village as I do, one gets to know so much about human nature," Miss Marple says in *13 Clues for Miss Marple* (1966). "Really, I have no gifts — no gifts at all — except perhaps a certain knowledge of human nature. People, I find, are apt to be far too trustful. I'm afraid that I have tendency to always believe the worst. Not a nice trait, but so often justified by subsequent events" (*A Murder Is Announced*).

Explaining to her friends why they did not suspect the real murderer in *Sleeping Murder*: "You believed what he said. It is really very dangerous to believe people. I never have for years" (*Sleeping Murder*). As a longtime parish priest, I can feel the resonance.

So what is human nature like for Dame Agatha? She and St. Augustine might well have been soulmates. "The depravity of human nature is unbelievable," Miss Marple tells us in *A Murder is Announced*. "Everybody is very much alike, really."

This is the real point at which Mrs. Christie breaks the rules. Simply put, she does not play by the formula of good and evil. Original sin taints everyone and everything.

In a Christie story, to assume that people are innocent and telling the truth because of their role or position would be just as absurd as judging people by their social class or old-school ties or economic status in real life, which of course we do.

Bindweed & Original Sin

Mrs. Christie articulates a marvelous recurring symbol of original sin's clutch on human nature, and our hope for deliv-



Graphic novel adaptations of Christie's books in various languages.

Wikimedia Commons

the little moral strength they may possess," she says in *A Murder Announced*.

The twin hopes of the detective novel have been human reason and intuition. And the hope has been, of course, to solve and settle everything right now within this world.

In her last two cases, *Curtain* for Hercule Poirot, *Sleeping Murder* for Miss Marple, Mrs. Christie noted the fallibility of these hopes.

Hercule Poirot, the grandmaster of logic, awaits his death "not knowing" and contemplating that this might be appropriate for someone who had always been so self-assured. He ends his career trusting not his "little gray cells" but in "*le bon dieu* — humble and like a little child," (Matt. 18:4), with a prayer that God's punishment or mercy for Poirot's moral choices will be swift.

Miss Marple departs the literary stage reminding us that "one's feelings are not

erance in bindweed. An innocuous plant, easily overlooked, bindweed starts as a tender, climbing vine, but if left unchecked it will kill all in its path. It is a reminder of the constant struggle that must be fought against an implacable foe.

Chapter 18 of *Sleeping Murder* opens with this striking paragraph: "Miss Marple bent down on the terrace outside the French window and dealt with some insidious bindweed. It was only a minor victory, since beneath the surface the bindweed remained in possession as always. But at least the delphiniums knew a temporary deliverance."

That could serve as a paradigm for the Christie mysteries, which deal only in temporary victories against the eruption of human sin. The heart within is still captive, and sin will surface again. But there can be some deliverance, a foretaste of the kingdom now.

Moral Choice

Christie novels have hope because Mrs. Christie believes in moral choice.

Theological perspectives about the road to human salvation and hope have historically pushed out to the opposing edges of total individual free will and responsibility or predestination and determinism. For the most part, on the everyday parish level, we tend to work with these in the balancing ground of inborn tendencies, the givens of our human nature, and the push-pull of our circumstances: individual choices made amid systemic shaping.

The choice that murderers make, Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple affirm, is moral in nature. Tendencies and temptations and circumstances to the contrary, it is always possible that people will make the moral choice.

Miss Marple is by her hard-nosed admission not a very "nice" person. But she is strong, and strength of moral character matters very much. "Weak and kindly people are often very treacherous ... if they've got a grudge against life it saps

always reliable guides" (*Sleeping Murder*).

In the startling final confrontation of *Nemesis* (1971), Miss Marple rises up in her shawl to confront the murderer — an implied living embodiment of that namesake goddess of retribution. When a detective inspector tells Miss Marple that he hit upon a major clue by pure chance, she responds: "I think you were led to it, Inspector ... but then I'm old-fashioned" (*A Murder Is Announced*).

In words reminiscent of Jesus' evocation of the kingdom, Miss Marple expresses her personal key to life as what goes on within the human heart in its quiet interaction with God. "It's what's in yourself that makes you happy or unhappy," she says in *A Murder Is Announced*.

Denouement

It was when I realized that Mrs. Christie genuinely believed in original sin that it all came together. Anyone really could do it — *all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. As in life, the clues are there in her stories. She doesn't cheat. We are blinded to what she lays out because *we* are blinded by our presuppositions.

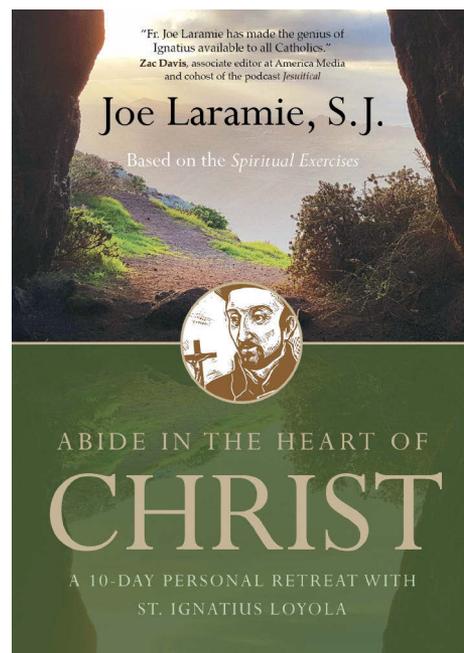
The theology of Dame Agatha's books is essentially Christian, with a deep sense of the wickedness and corruptibility of human nature. But she's not cynical and despairing. She holds love, moral character, choice, and justice out as the instances for at least temporary deliverance from the clutch of original sin. It's a taste within this life of what life can be like within a world innately connected to a larger moral arc.

Hers is a world in which we can recognize ourselves: broken yet searching for, and trusting in, redemption and *le bon dieu*. This is why she continues to touch the public soul.

The Rev. Leonard Freeman is a veteran journalist, retired priest, and contributor to The Living Church.

Jesus Is Our Heart Surgeon

Fr. Joe Laramie on how the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius can help Christians keep a holy Lent.



The Rev. Joe Laramie, SJ, is national director of the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network (popesprayerusa.net) in Milwaukee. In *Abide in the Heart of Christ: A 10-Day Personal Retreat with St Ignatius Loyola* (Ave Maria Press), Laramie offers reflections on Scripture, his life, and the teachings of St. Ignatius. The book includes Ignatian Spiritual Exercises that lead readers into imaginative engagement with Scripture and their lives. His website is joelaramiesj.com and his Twitter handle is @JoeLaramieSJ.

Dr. Elisabeth Kincaid spoke with Laramie about why the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius can be significant for all Christians, and the connection between Lent and learning to abide in the heart of Christ.

Their conversation has been edited for brevity.

Your book focuses on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius as significant for all Christians. How might the Spiritual Exercises be significant for Protestants?

Given the world we're in, Christians more and more need to love each other and cooperate. We're not each other's enemies, but rather friends in the Lord together. I love the wisdom of St. Ignatius and have a desire to share him with the broader Christian world. In *Abide with the Heart of Christ*, I'm really trying to have kind of meat-and-potatoes Christianity, rather than

focusing on denominational divisions. I focused on making it about a sincere relationship with Christ and growing in that relationship.

Would you describe what you are doing in this book as presenting the first ten days of an Ignatian retreat like a toolbox, giving different tools that can help people better lead a holy life?

Let's take the examination-of-conscience prayer in chapter 5. I think anyone could profit from looking back on their day and asking, "How has the

Lord been at work?" We can each take the Christian sense of a lively trust that God loves me, and then see, with the eyes of the Spirit, how God has been at work in a little friendly interaction with my family, or even with a coworker whom it's hard to get along with.

Let's say I notice one of those moments in my day and I say, "Lord I want to thank you because actually I was pretty compassionate, I was pretty patient with someone today." We're often pushed to view our faith as something that we only engage in for a couple of hours a week, and then sep-



We can take this to the Lord and begin by saying, “Jesus, let your heart renew my heart.”

—Fr. Joe Laramie

for conversation, celebration, some things like this.

Looking at God’s activity in these times teaches us to develop a grateful heart. We see this happening in the Bible, in the sense that the Bible highlights some of God’s key moments in human history, like the powerful moments where God has been at work in the people of Israel. We can ask something like this for ourselves from God, asking the Lord to imprint on our hearts evermore that awareness of his work in our life.

Would you talk about how a person might use your book and this idea of developing gratitude as a Lenten spiritual discipline?

Let’s lean into some biblical examples about the connection between penitence and gratitude. For example, let’s take that little line from Ezekiel 36: “I will give you new hearts, says the Lord.” Maybe you walk into Lent and say, “Lord I need a renewed heart from you.”

Jesus is powerful and wise and can give us that instantly. However, we see in Scripture that he often enough wants us to cooperate in that grace, even though the power is coming from him. In the Gospels, he perhaps calls aside the beggar to be with him alone for a moment, or to the lepers he says, “Go show yourselves to the priests,” just to say we do have some part in this.

You mention often that one of the key emphases of Ignatian spirituality is an imaginative engagement with the text. And you urge people to have an imaginative engagement with our bodies and the places around us. Living in a world where we must be distant from each other, and every aspect of our world is mediated by technology, would these practices be a real gift?

One place to do that is this heart image I keep going back to. We can begin in this type of scriptural engage-

ment by reflecting on Jesus’ risen heart and our own hearts. So let’s take the verse “I will take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”



We can take this to the Lord and begin by saying, “Jesus, let your heart renew my heart.” Then we can go on to ponder for a moment what it means to approach Jesus as the divine healer. This might mean that we pretend, in a kind of playful way, that Jesus is like a heart doctor.

The Living Church Foundation focuses on providing a voice for Anglicanism that is Catholic, evangelical, and ecumenical. How do those themes resonate with Ignatian Spirituality and the Spiritual Exercises?

There’s a line that shows up a few times across the Spiritual Exercises that is just this: “for me.” So Ignatius tells us perhaps to reflect on the Nativity scene: God takes flesh, is born of the Virgin Mary, and Ignatius says, “I will ponder this scene with great affection about how God did this for me.”

Yes, God loves the world, and yes, God loves all of us, but there’s a warm personal connection there. He did this for me.

Some of these sacred heart themes, I think, continue to draw us into that relationship with Christ. In a sense, all these things are rooted in the heart of Christ. A spirit of ecumenism, an evangelical spirit. Friendly communion among Anglicans, Catholics, and other Christians. You know, all Christians desire to be drawn into the heart of Christ. If we pursue that desire, he’s going to send us forth renewed to live the Gospel, to live in family life, to be in our workplaces. □

arate the rest of my life, the part that really matters, over here.

But an examination of conscience helps bring together the human and divine exemplified in Jesus. This type of prayer is going to help me see God’s work, and help me live the commandments and the teachings of Christ. Then when I come to worship on a Sunday, I’ll have more to bring to the altar in gratitude and can then ask for ongoing trust in the Lord.

In directing retreats and talking about your book, have you seen examination of conscience leading to a place of freedom?

Yes. Examining conscience is one way we learn about the freedom in Christ that comes from experiencing gratitude. Gratitude is one of the core virtues that St. Ignatius is constantly pressing us toward. For instance, in Chapter 3, I talk about “A Spiritual Top Ten List.” This idea comes from ESPN *SportsCenter*, but I talk about how writing one provides a little springboard that brings us to this spiritual practice.

So, not only should we get into the habit of daily examination, but also lifelong examination by asking, “Lord, show me how you have been involved in key moments in my life.” These could be explicitly religious, like my ordination or your wedding day. Or, in a spirit of Christian humanism, let’s say a beautiful family vacation, out in the mountains of Denver or the beaches of Florida, the beauty of nature, a time

Forgiveness

By Victor Lee Austin

What makes forgiveness an ethical issue? Forgiveness is obviously central to Christian belief: God offers sinners forgiveness of sins. But what makes it a question of morals?

The Lord's Prayer asserts the connection in the petition that God forgive us our trespasses "as we forgive those who trespass against us." In this prayer, Jesus makes the claim that God's forgiveness of us is somehow connected with our forgiveness of others: "as we forgive." So forgiveness is to make a change in our behavior, in our human practices. But this assertion in the Lord's Prayer does not explain the connection. What are the ethics of forgiveness?

Let's start with a distinction that Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral Theology at Oxford, has made in various contexts. It applies both to one individual forgiving another, and to the sort of corporate forgiveness that might be called for in group relations. Biggar distinguishes two aspects of a complete act of forgiveness: compassion and absolution.

We begin with *compassion* toward the person who has sinned against us. Compassion leads us to recognize that the person who has harmed us is a fellow human being. We remember that none of us is perfect, and we ponder that there may be things in the life of the person who has harmed us that we don't know about and that have played into her action, and so forth. It is, as we say, a willingness to cut others some slack.

I remember reading in a story by

Tolstoy (the rest of the story I have long forgotten) the protestation of a character that, although everyone thought he was a good person, there was no evil deed beyond his doing. He had never murdered or robbed or committed adultery, but he knew, given the right circumstances, he could have committed any of those deeds.

Biggar says similarly that each of us can realize we are "no stranger to the psychic powers that drive human beings to abuse each other; that some individuals ... are less well equipped than others to resist common pressures; and that some are fated to find themselves trapped in situations where only an extraordinary moral heroism could save them from doing terrible evil" (*In Defence of War* [Oxford, 2013], p. 63).

To have compassion is emphatically not to deny that a wrong has been committed. Compassion does not sweep wrongdoing under the proverbial rug. Indeed, if the sin is a crime, compassion does not foreclose facing legal consequences. You can have compassion on people at the same time as you believe they need to face the law.

Nonetheless, compassion precedes all consequences. It is one-sided. It is entirely within the hands of those who have suffered harm at the hands of others. We can have compassion for, and offer compassion to, anyone who has sinned against us — the offender does not need to be sorry or repentant or anything else. Compassion thus is a letting go from our side, a certain humility that decides not keep score and will not allow this sin to be determinative of our own future.

This first step of forgiveness, com-

passion, is our willingness to be reconciled, should that turn out to be possible.

The second half of forgiveness is *absolution*. Unlike compassion, absolution requires that sinners repent and be willing to atone for the sin that has been done. When the sinner does repent and is willing to repair, then the victim is able to offer, and should not withhold, absolution. This is, Biggar writes, "the moment when ... the victim addresses the perpetrator and says, 'I forgive you. The trust that was broken is now restored. Our future will no longer be haunted by our past'" (p. 66).

Real absolution is contingent on the offender's sorrowful recognition. There are three parts to this. First, the offender must own that it was a fault that was committed, not just a mistake, not just "I'm sorry it bothered you, what I did." No: there must be acknowledgment that what has happened was truly wrong.

Second, ownership: the offender must see that the wrong is something for which the offender is responsible. It will not do to say, "Yes, that was wrong, but it wasn't my fault."

And third, there must be sorrow. One might say, "I know it was wrong, and I know I'm responsible, but I don't care." That's not enough.

But when an offender acknowledges that a fault has been committed, and takes responsibility for it, and has sorrow, that is enough. Now absolution can occur. And it is the moral responsibility of the victim then to step forward, to grant absolution, to complete the process of forgiveness.

Forgiveness, one sees, is a complex matter that requires discernment, a certain openness, a steadiness in truthful naming, a process over time, and more. It truly is a matter of ethics, of moral growth and virtue. This complexity, I have found, is pastorally helpful.

Parishioners of mine have felt guilty because, they said, they could not forgive someone who had abused them. But when I inquired, I would find out that the wrongdoer never asked for forgiveness, never repented. In such a case, complete forgiveness is not humanly possible: absolution requires repentance. They need not feel guilt, I would say, although the situation is certainly one of sorrow.

Sometimes they are surprised to hear this. “I thought Christians were supposed to forgive everyone.” Then we can explore the two parts of forgiveness, the distinction between compassion and absolution. Even though absolution is impossible in this case, is it possible to work on one’s compassion?

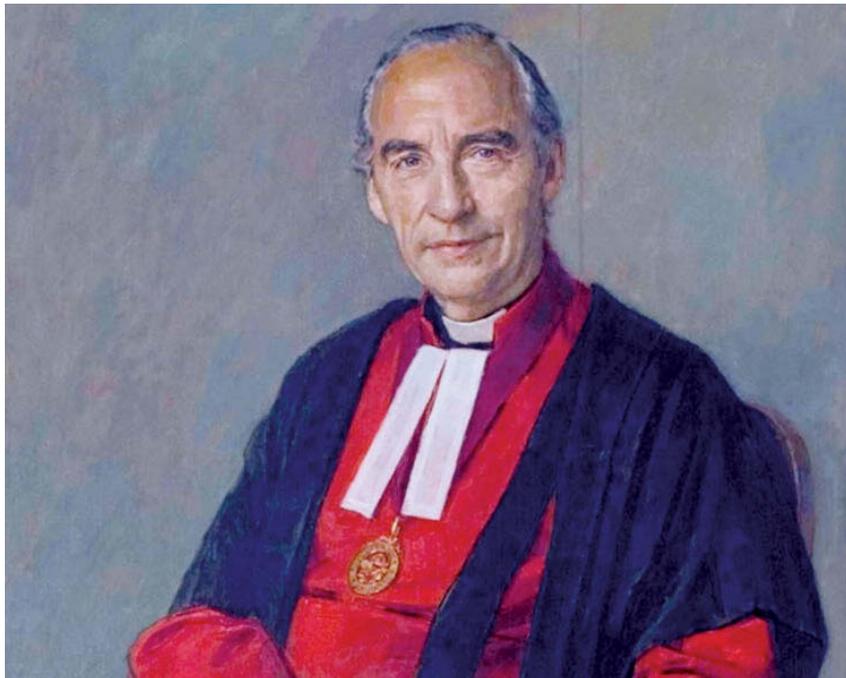
I know a priest who takes this further. Given the brokenness of our world and the egregiousness of the sin that was done to you (he might say), you do not have to offer forgiveness. What if your offender came to you with full repentance? Would you be able to forgive him? Maybe not, he would say, and maybe in this broken world you do not have to. “But in that case,” this priest asks, “would it be okay with you” — here he pauses — “if God forgave him?”

Such are the realities that show the moral task of forgiveness in this life. When the kingdom comes, all offenses are overcome: acknowledged and forgiven in full, not only by God but by the fellowship of compassionate former sinners who are that kingdom’s citizens, people who used to pray from their heart (but no longer need to) that their sins would be forgiven even as they forgave the sins of others.

The Rev. Canon Dr. Victor Lee Austin is theologian in residence for the Diocese of Dallas and Church of the Incarnation, Dallas.



Josh Applegate photo via Unsplash



Portrait of Michael Clement Otway Mayne, Dean of Westminster

westminster-abbey.org

A Book for Our Time

A personal reflection
by Ronald A. Wells

About six months into the COVID-19 quarantine, a friend from another part of the country called to ask how I was getting on. I mentioned that a silver lining was the chance to do a lot of reading, including a return to the books of Michael Mayne, dean of Westminster Abbey from 1986 to 1996.

My caller asked about Mayne, whom he had not read. I gave a quick rundown, saying that one of my favorites was *A Year Lost and Found* (1987). My friend quipped that he did not have so many years left that he could afford to lose a year to the lockdown. Just then I realized that *A Year Lost and Found* was the book for our time, as it can help us think of what we have lost since March 2020 and what, if anything, we have found.

The book is about Mayne's year of struggling with a difficult illness. It was a year lost from work, family, and general vitality. As a Christian, however, he looked for what might be learned from a year of pain and loss, asking if it could somehow be redeemed. If we follow the journey of his lost year, I hope we may see something for ourselves to find in this year of social isolation.

I am glad to have known Mayne, who died of cancer in 2006. He wrote *A Year Lost and Found* at the end of his tenure in Cambridge and when he was about to move to Westminster. Readers must reach the end of the book to learn what illness had afflicted him for a year. That's because he only received a clear diagnosis when the illness had just about run its course. For an agonizingly long time, Mayne and his wife, Alison, moved from doctor to doctor trying to find out why his glands were swollen, his lungs were severely taxed when he inhaled, his chest felt constant pressure, and his legs were very weak.

Doctors ran tests of all kinds, but in the end they could

not tell what was wrong. Not only did Mayne feel dreadful, and was confined to his room and back yard, but there was the frustration of not knowing what was wrong. So, what was the illness? At the end of the year he finally found out from a specialist that it was myalgic encephalomyelitis, a chronic fatigue syndrome that follows a glandular viral disease. At the time there was little known about the disease in Britain.

The year of mid-1986 to mid-1987 was definitely lost for Mayne. As an already accomplished writer, he was determined to think and write about the experience to discern what could be learned, even redeemed, in this unwelcome period of confinement. It is to our benefit that he did.

His vestry and parishioners at Great St. Mary's were solicitous and often asked how he was doing. Both because of English reserve and because he did not know what was wrong, he said little. He wanted to say that he was as weak as a kitten, that his arms ached constantly and that his chest felt bruised. Instead, he was mostly quiet, and was driven in upon himself in a world contracted to four walls.

Mayne's prayer life suffered. Even saying the daily office, as he had done for years, now felt strained and unreal. He found solace, as many have before and since, in the Psalms: "I discovered in my heart that time and again they spoke to my condition of desolation and could assure of the love and presence of God."

Nevertheless, by the end of the summer of 1986, he admits to having been reduced to periods of anger and self-pity. He often found that his only blessing was the touch of those who cared for him: the clasp of a friend's hand or that of priestly friends laying on hands.

Mayne's health improved somewhat by the late autumn of

Mission Possible

Nourishing Connections

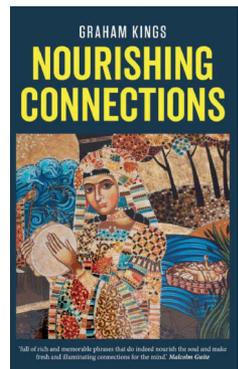
By **Graham Kings**

Canterbury Press Norwich

80 pp., \$17.99

Review by Phoebe Pettingell

Since the theology of missions has long been one of Graham Kings's principal subjects, it should not come as a surprise that his collection of poetry, *Nourishing Connections*, should follow this theme. The relationship between God and humanity, Jesus'



call to be his hands in society, meditations on passages from the Gospels, and a collaboration with a Bulgarian icon writer, Silvia Dimitrova, on women of the Old and New Testaments, all contribute to a rich feast for thoughtful readers. Kings has had a varied career, teaching in Kenya and at Cambridge, as a parish priest, then as a vicar and bishop, as well as mission theologian for the Anglican Communion.

Kings likes to call his poems “ruminations,” as if in reading we chewed passages like grazing animals, an apt metaphor for “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest.” He observes that Scripture often indulges in wordplay, although this is sometimes lost in translation. Some of his favorite poets use wordplay and word games like acrostics, as well as puns — George Herbert comes immediately to mind. Kings's poetry is full of some of these devices: “For God, matter matters: / For the Word became Flesh”; or “God used means to save mean people.” Here *mean* shows its various adjectival ambiguities of *humble*, or *nasty*. He believes that the Holy Spirit, as a

(Continued on next page)

1986. Just then a letter arrived from the Prime Minister's office offering him the post at Westminster Abbey. He was confused by it. In normal times, such an invitation would have been exhilarating as well as daunting. But now? Really?

He writes: “I felt so withdrawn from my normal world, so out of touch with my normal instincts and emotions, so bewildered and demoralized by this tedious and undiagnosable thing that had dragged me down, that the whole proposition seemed unreal, impossible.”

In the end, Mayne accepted the appointment. It was to be announced in January 1987 and he was to assume duties at the Abbey in July. His strength rose and fell, and he was not fully healed. He had to trust that he would be up for the rigors of Westminster Abbey by then. [Spoiler alert: he was.]

In trying to discern the spiritual meaning of his lost year, Mayne returned to books that had meant much to him. Chief among them was *The Stature of Waiting* by W.H. Vanstone (1982). Vanstone sees two phases in Jesus' life, the active and the passive: the first of gathering disciples, traveling about, healing and teaching; the second, beginning in Gethsemane, when the Passion begins. His hands were tied, and he was a person not doing but being done to.

As Mayne reflects, “now he is at the mercy of those who flog him, scourge him, try him, crucify him.” Jesus is, at once, the one who teaches, heals, and sets free, and is the one who suffers and endures the worst we can do to him. In an absolutely riveting passage Mayne writes, “Nowhere is Jesus more powerful than in his passive suffering on the cross. Nowhere does he show more clearly the truth of the passive, suffering God whose hands are tied by love.”

This was of great comfort to Mayne, and to us in our time. When we become ill or old, we can receive with grace what is done to, and for, us. We are no less valuable, as Mayne encourages us to grasp, if we can see our time of dependence as a creative sharing in the nature of God himself who, in Jesus, became powerless and vulnerable. Mayne quotes Søren Kierkegaard to great effect, that Jesus must have known how it would all end, but he was without anxiety because “he had eternity with him in the day that is called today, hence the next day had no power over him.”

As Mayne reflects on this, he reckons that perhaps he has found the answer to the question of why he had been stopped in in tracks, interrupting a busy ministry, with healing so slow and a diagnosis elusive. He wants to join with “those who are able to use their sickness, their pain, even their dying as a time for growth and a newfound trust in God who holds us in death and in life and will not let us go.” To do so would be, in a profound way, to have his lost year redeemed.

These last thoughts are very encouraging to all of us who have endured the pandemic, and our time apart from our normal lives. First, to be grateful for survival at all, unlike hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens who succumbed to the virus. Second, to name and accept that the year of our confinement is a year we have indeed lost.

If we follow the lead of Dean Mayne, we can see anew what believers have known, but perhaps lost or forgotten, and might find again in this year.

Jesus did not offer people perfect health and a painless death. Human minds and bodies are fragile and vulnerable. What he offers is eternal life: a new relationship with God of such quality that nothing that may happen can destroy it. And it is that kind of confidence and trust in God, come what may, which is the true healing of the human spirit.

Ronald A. Wells is professor of history, emeritus, at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Magdalene Through the Centuries

Review by John Baxter

In *The Golden Legend*, a 13th-century compilation of saints' lives, Mary Magdalene is depicted as transported in a rudderless boat to the south coast of France where, in Marseilles, she converts the governor and his wife to Christianity.

She also travels to Aix, bringing in more converts before retiring to a mountain cave where she lives a life of secluded contemplation. This account, like many others from this period and earlier, fleshes out the biblical narrative in some detail, inventing a good bit of material and (beginning with Pope Gre-

gory in 591) conflating the explicit references to Mary in the Passion narratives and in the account of the woman possessed by seven devils (Luke 8:2) with other figures, notably with Mary of Bethany and with the unnamed sinner who washes Christ's feet with her tears (Luke 7:37-50). Sometimes the conflation reaches even further to include the bride from the wedding at Cana or the bride from the Song of Songs. And sometimes the invention endows her with a wealthy, landowning family in Galilee or takes her on a different, apostolic journey — to Ephesus.

The focus of Margaret Arnold's wide-ranging and wonderfully illumi-

nating study is on the Reformation, but her first chapter gives a detailed account of "The Medieval Magdalene," and it establishes one of the primary reasons for the enduring popularity of Mary Magdalene. As an ordinary human — sinner as well as saint — she is in some respects more accessible than the Virgin Mary (the embodiment of pious perfection); in her ordinary humanity (especially in the conflated versions), she offers a wider range of human activity. She is the grief-stricken witness at the empty tomb, and then the energetic speaker of the good news of the resurrection. She is the one who, in contrast to her sister Martha, chooses "the better part" of enrapt attention to Christ's teachings. She is, with her tears and her ointment and her kisses, the penitent sinner who is rewarded with forgiveness. In these

(Continued from previous page)

person of the Trinity, might be referred to as he or she but never it, and writes a lyrical meditation on feminine imagery for the Spirit's work.

The Persons of the Trinity are continually seen in action in these poems. God "is stranger than we know," and "a free God, / yet we try to cage you." Jesus descends into the subway to encounter alienated young people trapped in misery and addiction, and releases them from their bondage. The Spirit "does not ingratiate but delivers grace" in ways that catch us off-balance and open new vistas in our hitherto blinded minds. Kings even wonders if there is some sense in which Jesus may be said to be the Son of Allah, as the poet prays in a mosque. Do People of the Book, for our various differences, worship the same God? Kings is especially concerned with godly people. He imagines Augustine in the moments leading to his conversion:

Stalking in the garden in the heat
of the moment,
Reflecting on complexity
of voluntary movement,
Slunk in listless and leaden despair

Tangled, contorted and tearing his hair,
Rapping his head and wrapping his knees,
Rabidly ravaging under the trees,
Wanting to wait and waiting to want

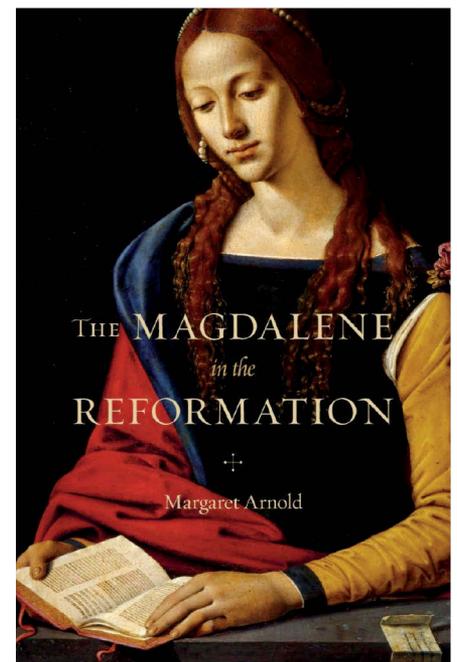
until the child's song brings revelation. Kings lauds the prophetic Bishop Alexander Muge of Kenya, probably martyred for his convictions; Nelson Mandela for ending apartheid; the theology of Anselm; and popes Francis, Benedict XXIII, and John Paul II.

Nourishing Connections is a rich feast of words meant to be read and pondered over. I have found it enlightening and helpful in describing wonderful glimpses of the divine in the mundane. Here is Kings in a poem dedicated to Rowan Williams, another fine theologian and poet:

Silence brings
peace amidst chatter;
stillness amidst clatter;
essence at the end of incessance;
space for God's eloquence.

There is plenty to ruminate on in these delightful and profound poems.

Phoebe Pettingell is a writer and editor living in northern Wisconsin.



The Magdalene in the Reformation

By Margaret Arnold
Belknap/Harvard University Press,
pp. 312, \$29.95



The Penitent Magdalene by Caravaggio

roles, she is consistently a model: for the sacrament of penance or for ascetic contemplation or for evangelism, the “apostle to the apostles.”

At the same time, however, her authority as a model has been frequently tested. Arnold shows that the humanists of the 16th century were aware that the medieval Mary was in several ways an amalgam of legend and of biblical conflations and that these needed to be disentangled if a reformed religion were to be based on an accurate understanding of Scripture. Many of the Reformers, however, were content to retain at least some aspects of the composite Mary if that helped serve a theological point.

Martin Luther retains the conflation of Mary with the sinful woman of Luke 7, but he turns away from the earlier understanding of her as an illustration of the efficacy of penitence, and interprets her as example of justification by faith alone. The woman’s love for Christ is a consequence of his mercy, not a summoning of it. Luther also reinterprets the relation of Mary and Martha: not a contrast between the contemplative and the active life but a

coordination of them, with faith leading the way. On Mary as first witness of the resurrection, Luther is somewhat equivocal. He is happy to accord her equality with the other disciples and especially with Peter, since that equality works in support of his challenge to the supremacy of the pope. He also understands that such equality has some far-reaching implications for “the priesthood of all believers,” and especially for lay preachers and female preachers, yet he is

somewhat less than enthusiastic about fully endorsing the latter. Chapter 3, one of Arnold’s most original contributions, surveys six women who are all Lutherans in essentials, but who are more enthusiastic than he was about a woman’s preaching.

In the Catholic Counter-Reformation, too, appeals to “the prostitute-saint” are ubiquitous, focusing frequently on the Holy Penitent and sometimes using her to refute Luther. Cardinal Thomas Cajentin argues (in 1532) that while faith may initiate Mary’s repentance, “charity is the cause completing the forgiveness of sins.” Christ did say to her, “Your faith has saved you” (Luke 7:50), but he also said, “Many sins are forgiven her *because* she has loved much” (Luke 7:47). This emphasis on the power of love underlies a renewed commitment to charitable works, including “the work of Magdalene houses for converting and reforming prostitutes.” A fascination with the sexual sinner also produced memorable works of art, including masterpieces by Titian, Caravaggio, and Artemisia Gentileschi. Each of these has a distinctive per-

spective, but all concentrate on the actual moment of repentance, which allows them to depict both the sensuous beauty and the remorseful penitent, simultaneously.

For many Catholic women, however, the focus is rather on the witness to the resurrection. Teresa of Avila, for example, when introducing reforms to her order, draws on ideas similar to those of Luther in striving to balance the active with the contemplative life: Martha is to receive credit equally with Mary. Nevertheless, most of these women tended to celebrate the witness of the resurrection less for her evangelical potential and more for her intimacy with Christ, for the potency of her love and commiseration.

For John Calvin, on the other hand, that commiseration is something of a problem, and in this respect, he differs not only from Catholic reformers but also from Martin Luther. For him, Mary’s weeping at the empty tomb is a sign of emotional excess, of weakness, of a lack of faith. For him and at least some of his followers, there is no place for “sentimental pleading with God,” and they strip away most aspects of the composite Mary, in an impulse that seems parallel with the iconoclasm that stripped images of the saints from places of worship.

The Magdalene in the Reformation is a striking achievement, a lucid and comprehensive survey of the multiple roles of the saint in the Reformation. Saint Mary is an especially formative influence for women seeking a voice and a vocation within various religious communities, but she is equally inspirational for many men. She is summoned as champion for large and complex theological and political issues, even as she is also the model for private devotions, and this book’s wealth of detailed examples of the latter show just how diverse and various these can be.

John Baxter is professor emeritus at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

God's Cruciform Heart

Review by Frank Logue

Anchoring Trafalgar Square in the heart of London, St. Martin-in-the-Fields began as the church beyond the walls of the city and remains known for its commitment to serving those on the edge of society.

The Rev. Dr. Samuel Wells, vicar of the church since 2012, is a popular author and has been a parish priest for more than 20 years. In *A Cross in the Heart of God: Reflections on the Death of Jesus*, he takes us beyond theories of the atonement to the Church that finds God on the edge and so becomes the context that makes this story real.

We followers of Jesus are not just to learn of our Savior's life and ministry, but are to embody salvation in Christ to show "such hopefulness, such faithfulness, such patience, such endurance, such forgiveness, such truthfulness that could only be possible if Jesus is with us, whatever, however, forever."

In this way, the Church becomes a question as one wonders at a people that long to bring others out of exile, only to find that the only explanation for such a community is Jesus. It is not a theory of how the Holy Trinity makes us one, but a context in which people are drawn into that story and transformed by it.

Wells brings us to "the most poignant and terrifying moment in all history" through an exploration of the biblical theology of the cross with reflections on the images of the cross we discover in the Old Testament, the Epistles, and finally the Gospels. If you are looking for a critical analysis that mines these passages without straying from the text in its initial literary and cultural context, you will be disappointed. Instead, the author explores varied images, from the covenant with Noah to the seeming foolishness of worshiping the crucified one, drawing out the efficacy these motifs

possess to reveal the very heart of God.

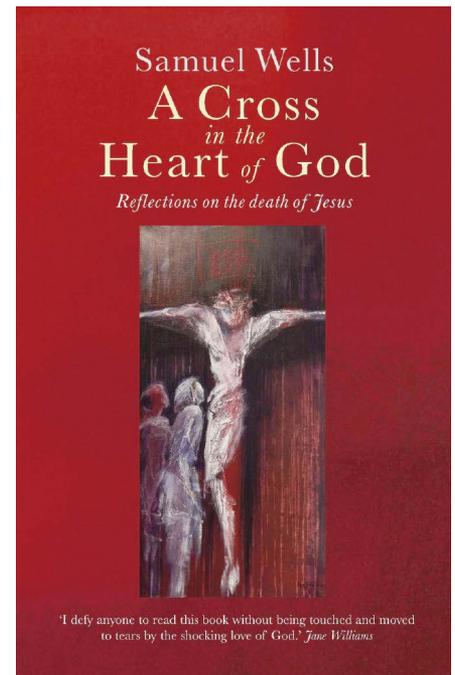
This exploration of the 18 themes, from testing and reconciliation to betrayal and mockery, occurs through a pastor's look at cinema and novels, examples from culture that demonstrate how these images still speak to us. One readily sees how these images and Wells's work with them emerged from his preaching and teaching in a parish.

Here that approach finds additional depth through a sustained look at the many facets of the cross we find through all of Scripture. Rather than a sermon that connects God's providence as seen in the binding of Isaac to that same providence in the cross, we see how these stories build on one another to reveal how shockingly profound is the love God has for us. Any of the reflections offers a new insight, but altogether they offer the reader a broader perspective of the Paschal mystery at the center of our faith.

The book is designed for small groups to use in Lent, with a study guide offering a prayer for each week together with prompts for discussion. These questions are particularly well-crafted to open robust conversation, as they invite readers to share stories of their lives and wonder at the ways these connect to a deeper understanding of Jesus' Passion. Although it is well-suited to a typical weekly study in Lent, this thought-provoking book is ideal for individual reading as we prepare for Easter or at any time.

While not offering the last word on the cross, this able guide for Lenten study provides an unflinching look at the astounding love revealed as the Holy Trinity has to choose between being with one another or with us, and Jesus chooses us.

The Rt. Rev. Frank Logue is the Bishop of Georgia.



A Cross in the Heart of God

Reflections on the Death of Jesus

By Samuel Wells

Canterbury Press, pp. 144, \$20.99

The Universal Experience

By Pamela A. Lewis

A well-known idiom asserts that death and taxes are life's two certainties. The third is suffering. Suffering comes to us all, yet we try mightily to avoid it and to seek relief from the pain and helplessness it inflicts.

The Buddha taught that suffering in this world is inevitable and is the result of our insatiable desires, the vicious cycle of our wanting and not wanting, our getting and not getting.

His response to this inescapable truth was to extend compassion and loving kindness to others, which would in turn assuage their anguish.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus, whose life was marked by sorrow, showed extraordinary compassion to all who suffered in body and spirit, and declared that as he had overcome the world's suffering, others could do likewise.

In the words of Dr. Thomas Hora, a psychiatrist whose practice centered on spiritual teachings, suffering is inevitable, but is not necessary. This small anthology of essays, stories, and poems, written by men and women of different faith traditions, eras, and countries, acknowledges the reality of suffering, but also reminds us that it does not have the last word.

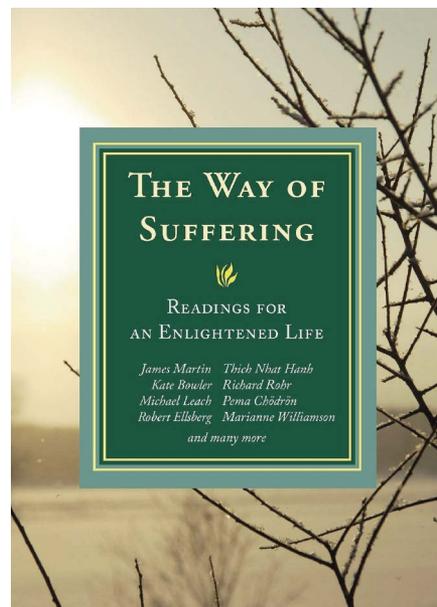
In Part One of the collection, "No Easy Answers," the Rev. James Martin, SJ, reflects on that fundamental question in "Why Is There Suffering?" Martin cites the thought of rabbis Daniel Polish and Abraham Joshua Heschel, who point out the impossibility of fully understanding God's purposes. Martin lands firmly on the Christian teaching that we can take comfort in knowing that God in Christ shares our grief and accompanies us in our sufferings.

In "I Don't Have an Explanation, and Yet," Maryanne J. Kane struggles with God's seeming unwillingness to heal her of a painful and disfiguring skin problem, but learns that pain can engender empathy.

Victor Parachin's "Changing Our Relationship to Pain" recounts a tale of the Buddha helping a mother, whose daughter has died, to learn that suffering is universal and that we alter our suffering by altering how we think about it.

Part One's selections reflect on the kinds of suffering we prefer not to countenance, such as Dorothy Soelle's "God on the Gallows" and "When I Knew: Godlessness and God on September 11" by Patrick Giles.

Parts Two ("Out of Darkness, Light") and Three ("From Light, Love") hold out hope, as in poet



The Way of Suffering
Readings for an Enlightened Life
Orbis, pp. 224, \$20

Seamus Heaney's almost defiant "When Hope and History Rhyme" and Henri Nouwen's moving "The Cup of Sorrow Is Also the Cup of Joy."

"Sparks" — brief poems, maxims, and excerpts from the Scriptures — are tucked among the longer pieces, some by writers not usually associated with spirituality, including Louis Pasteur and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Despite the range of writers comprising this otherwise fine anthology, it was disappointing to note who is absent. One is hard-pressed to believe there are no African American authors who have written on an experience as universal as suffering.

For those who seek truth, understanding, and solace in their times of suffering, *The Way of Suffering* is a beautiful and helpful compilation of works by those who speak from experience.

Pamela A. Lewis is a member of Saint Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue, in New York City. She writes on topics of faith.

PEOPLE & PLACES

Appointments

The Rev. **Robert Solon Jr.** is priest in charge of St. John's, Passaic, N.J.

Sr. **Sophia Rose** is a novice of the Order of St. Helena, North Augusta, S.C.

The Rev. **Fabio Sotelo** is interim priest of St. Edward's, Lawrenceville, Ga.

The Rev. Dn. **Tim Spannaus** is archdeacon of the Diocese of Michigan.

The Rev. **Iain Stanford** is rector of St. Peter's, Redwood City, Calif.

The Rev. **Darren Steadman** is lower school chaplain of St. Christopher's School, Richmond, Va.

The Rev. **Donna Steckline** is rector of Trinity, Arrington, Va.

The Rev. Dr. **Lee Stephens** is vicar of St. Bede's, Cleveland, Okla.

The Rev. **Jeff Stevenson** is rector of St. Ann's, Sayville, N.Y.

The Rev. **Matthew Stewart** is priest in charge of St. James, Cambridge, Mass.

The Rev. **Benjamin Straley** is rector of St. Stephen's, Providence, R.I.

The Rev. **Jane Stratford** is vicar of St. Anna's, Antioch, Calif.

The Rev. **Richard Suero** is priest in charge of San Andres, Yonkers, N.Y.

The Rev. **Anne Thatcher** is rector of St. Peter's, Morristown, N.J.

The Very Rev. **Benjamin Thomas** is interim dean of Christ Church Cathedral, Eau Claire, Wis.

The Rev. **Bill Van Oss** is rector of St. Michael and All Angels, Sanibel, Fla.

The Rev. **Sharon Voelker** is rector of St. Stephen's, Troy, Mich.

The Rev. **Charles Wallace** is priest in charge of Bethesda, Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

Deaths

The Rev. Canon **M. Fred Himmerich**, who "led a life filled with music, faith, justice, friendship, and family," died at his home at St. John's on the Lake new home community in Milwaukee on January 29 at 90.



Himmerich grew up on farms in South Dakota and Washington, and felt a call to the priesthood from an early

age. He began his ecclesiastical work as assistant organist at St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, South Dakota, while still a teenager.

He earned degrees in literature and classics from Macalester College and the University of Minnesota before training for the priesthood at Nashotah House. He later earned a doctorate in theology from Marquette University.

He was ordained in 1962, and was first assistant rector at St. Paul's Church in Beloit, Wisconsin. Three years later, he became rector of St. Paul's in Watertown, Wisconsin, which he served until his retirement 30 years later.

A highlight of his ministry was helping the 1969 Welfare Mothers' March organized by the Rev. James Groppi of Milwaukee, a Roman Catholic priest and political activist. Several hundred mothers marched nearly 90 miles from Milwaukee to Watertown and then to the State House in Madison, where they protested planned cuts in public assistance.

In defiance of a ban by Watertown's city council, Himmerich opened St. Paul's to the marching mothers. With members of the congregation, he fed them and helped them find overnight accommodations.

He later founded Bread and Roses, a free community meal and a daycare center in Watertown, and joined many civic organizations.

Himmerich baked bread for St. Paul's Sunday Eucharist for years, and made altar wine from grapes he grew in his back yard.

He remained active in ministry in retirement, serving as interim dean of All Saints' Cathedral in Milwaukee in 2007, attending daily Evensong at St. John's on the Lake, and leading a Bible study there until his death. He is survived by five children and nine grandchildren.

The Rev. **Charles R. McGinley**, a veteran of World War II and the Korean War who served parishes around the country, died peacefully on January 8 at 94.

McGinley was born in Hagerstown, Maryland, and served in the Navy during World War II as a member of the gun crews of several Merchant Marine ships in the Atlantic and Pacific.



He earned a degree in radio broadcasting and public relations from Boston University, honing a dramatic voice that would mark his later ministry.

After graduating from college, he was called into active duty during the Korean War and served on the USS Union in 1950 and 1951. He served as a Navy Reserve chaplain for 32 years, retiring as a commander.

He prepared for ministry at Virginia Theological Seminary, graduating in 1957, and served churches in Richmond and Kempsville, Virginia; San Jose, California; and Newton, Kansas. In his final ministry, McGinley served for 11 years as rector of St. Paul's, Sharpsburg, and St. Mark's, Lappans, Maryland.

He and his wife, Katherine, served on the board of the Hagerstown Free Clinic for many years, and he volunteered with Meals on Wheels.

He was preceded in death by his wife of 68 years, and is survived by three sons, four grandchildren, and nine great-grandchildren.

LaVeta (Ann) Wafer, who had a decades-long ministry of spiritual counseling and prayer, died at Thomas the Apostle Center in Cody, Wyoming, on February 4 at 88.

She was born in Clodine, Texas. As a young woman in Houston, she became



involved with the Church of the Redeemer, a leader in the charismatic renewal that began in the the 1960s. She was part of a communal household and served as a spiritual counselor and leader

of Bible studies and prayer groups.

Wafer became a member of the Community of Celebration, a religious order founded by Redeemer's rector, the Rev. Graham Pulkingham. She moved with the community to Coventry, England, in 1974. Wafer followed the community to Great Cumbrae, Scotland, and back to Houston, where she continued as a lay leader at Church of the Redeemer.

In 1990, she moved to the Thomas the Apostle Center, a retreat ministry founded by Daphne Grimes, whom she had met while living in England. Wafer served as its business manager and executive director.

She was a member of Christ Church in Cody for 30 years and assisted with the ministry of the Diocese of Wyoming, especially as a spiritual director, for the rest of her life. She is survived by her daughter, Darlene Wafer.

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“The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables” (John 2:13-14). Animal sacrifice was an accepted and vital part of temple worship, for which worshipers made a monetary offering. The moneychangers in the temple precinct exchanged coins with imperial or pagan images for legal Tyrian coinage. On the surface, nothing is wrong or out of order. This incident perhaps stands as a reminder that, under the calm surface of *right religion*, there can be a torrent of corruption.

How much profit did the moneychangers make in the transaction? Jesus said that “my Father’s house” has become a “house of market.” And did the religion to which Jesus belonged forget that the Temple was to be “a house of prayer for all people” (Isa. 56:7)? Amid questions we cannot answer, we have the firm promise of a new temple raised up after three days, the temple of the body of Jesus, of which we are members and living stones.

The body of Jesus is constructed of a human nature, humanity generally and individually. He is a Jew who is first and foremost a human being like all other human beings. His body is universal, his human nature universal, and his divinity inexhaustible. He is the temple of the universe. He is everywhere and at all times “in my Father’s house.”

“The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). Jesus was among us and still is, though not merely as one of us. He is among us as the temple once torn down and restored. “Destroy this temple,” Jesus said, “and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). Risen, the temple of his body bore the wounds of his passion and death. Resurrection is not, therefore, a simple reversal, but an

assumption of all that Jesus suffered and endured, all that humans everywhere have suffered and endured, and the evil done one to another — an eternal victory over evil by the forgiveness of the Father.

The cross is scandalous and foolish. Is it not a curse, is it not ridicule, torture, and rejection: Is it not everything from which we want to be saved? Is it not death? The body of Jesus is a cross. “Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your loving arms on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace” (Morning Prayer, p. 101). His loving embrace and his wounds are a world without end. The last word for his executioners is a plea for forgiveness. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

It is impossible to look at Jesus without seeing what we have done. For all the goodness of human beings, there is no denying our propensity for what is vile and violent, vicious and cruel, narrow and petty. All our worst fell upon him. He was betrayed, falsely condemned, tortured in soul and body, hung out to die. The work of human beings!

Risen from the dead, Jesus looks out upon a guilty world, a world fallen and frantic, a world steeped in violence, and he says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Jesus is the scandal of forgiveness, and forgiveness is nothing less than the impossibility of resurrection from the dead.

Look It Up

Read Exodus 20:2.

Think About It

Your God has delivered you from sin and death.

Who We Are

Depravity is not the problem, certainly not the first homiletic challenge. Illustrations of the worst human behavior are too easy to find; a mere glance at the endless news cycle or a moment's reflection before one's own conscience will lay it all bare. Yet what is really accomplished by staring at human wickedness? Perhaps the hope is to highlight our need for redemption, a Savior, a rescue from beyond this world.

Still, there can be something indulgent and morbid in this, the way people stop to gawk at a terrible car accident or a horrific crime scene. There is, let us admit, a kind of sick and alluring pleasure in horror and evil. It may seem right and serious to face it, but that does not in any sense equip us to overcome it. Consider the strange fact that people who live amid the daily threat of poverty, famine, and war, often pour out exhilarating praises of God and words of hope. They do not need to remind themselves of what they see at every turn. What they need is a hope by which to endure their lives (Rom. 8:24).

"If you want people to understand that they have fallen, you have to show them the *height from which they have fallen*," Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann said. If we start with how God intends us to be, we have a place of transcendent inspiration to place our hope and invigorate our souls for action. Who are we?

"God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). We are created to complement and help each other (Gen. 2:18). The image of God has been variously interpreted: male and female; memory, reason, and skill; mind, body, spirit; an inward Trinity and the capacity for endless love. We are, in the Father's eyes, a beautiful reflection of God, walking icons of holiness.

A remarkable passage from Ephesians says that we are "what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:9). There

is more to be said, however, about that phrase, "what he made us." Translators have used a variety of words: *workmanship*, *handiwork*, *accomplishment*, *creation*. "We are the workmanship of God." Even more striking is the use, by a few translators, of the words *masterpiece* and *poetry*. "We are God's masterpiece!"

Catherine of Siena, in her *Dialogue*, describes why God created human beings. "I want and ask for a special grace: What is that inestimable love that moved you to create humanity in your image and likeness? What or who was the cause of conferring such dignity on human beings? Indeed, [it is] *inestimable love alone* with which you have seen your creation in yourself, and by which you were caught [seized by love]."

Pursuing a similar thought, also through a vision, Dame Julian of Norwich, near the end of her *Showings*, wrote, "Thus I learned that love was our Lord's meaning. And I saw full surely that ere God made us he loved us; which love has never slackened, nor ever shall."

We have been created in the image and likeness of God; endowed with memory, reason, and skill; made for each other and mutual support; created from love and for love; adorned with beauty; fashioned a singular masterpiece; inscribed as a poem for the ages. Behold the height from which we have fallen!

Although we have fallen, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). God has "raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). In Christ, we are a masterpiece restored.

Look It Up

Ephesians 2:9-19

Think About It

We are the handiwork of God for good works.

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