

# *Radiance*

LIGHT SHINING IN THE DARKNESS

WHAT IF WE COULD  
LIVE WITHOUT SHAME?

TO BELIEVE YOU  
ARE LOVED

SILENCE AT THE  
SYCAMORE GAP

WHAT THE WELFARE  
STATE CANNOT GIVE

WHEN LIGHT FINDS YOU

***The Playboy  
Who Became a  
Joyful Beggar***



## Editor's letter

**S**hift is our banner this time: from surfaces to depth. Augustine once said, “The mind is not large enough to contain itself.” Teresa of Ávila called prayer “the inner castle.” The Catholic life dares us to enter.

In these pages, Maria Carvalho opens with Francis of Assisi—the playboy who became a joyful beggar—trading status for simplicity and discovering a freedom measured in joy, not in things. A young monk, David Copan, loses everything and finds the road. Fr Kevin O'Donnell turns walking into a theology of freedom.

Architect Lena Feindt brings us on a journey into seeing light as a manifestation of divine love. Gabriel Olearnik shows how shame is unmasked by love. James Surry reveals how faith can quiet relationship anxiety. Tom W. McGrath stands before vandalism at the Sycamore Gap and refuses despair. Leo McGrath reveals how spiritual and social health braid together. Marie Moore challenges the welfare state's impersonal mercy. And I tell how a Church that looks like patriarchy undid my own entitlement.

If you're ready to trade scroll-thin living for rooms of meaning, walk in. The castle is larger than you think.

— Richard Wise

# RADIANCE

Published quarterly for searching minds and Catholic enquirers

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Giotto, *The Renunciation of Worldly Goods*, c. 1297–1300



## *St Francis of Assisi*

# THE PLAYBOY WHO BECAME A JOYFUL BEGGAR

His radical embrace of poverty, peace, and love transformed not only the medieval Church but the meaning of freedom and happiness itself.

by *Maria Carvalho*

**I**f Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone was born in this century, he would star in the reality TV show *Ballin' with the Bernardones*. His Instagram would have over 10 million followers witnessing him live the high life of rocking the latest fashion, partying in music and dance festivals, and—of course—having beautiful women with him at every occasion. Giovanni, better known by his family and friends as Francesco (or Francis in English), was known for his generosity and charisma, acquiring the title of “king of feasts.” Every woman wanted to be with him, and every man wanted to be him.

All of this was bankrolled by his father, Pietro Bernardone, a wealthy cloth merchant. As Francesco was the oldest son, he was expected to take over the family business - though

perhaps, after proving his manhood in fighting a few battles to become a knight. Francis was born in 1182 in the town of Assisi, Italy. If he had lived his best life in the way he thought it would turn out, none of us would know him today, nine centuries later.

Instead, it is the radicalness of his conversion - motivated by a call from God to “rebuild his Church” - that has us remember him today as the joyful beggar whose simplicity attracted followers, secured papal recognition to form his brotherhood of Franciscans who lived the life of Christ of the Gospel, and transformed medieval Christianity. To imagine the arc of his conversion today, think Kim Kardashian becoming Mother Teresa.

St Francis of Assisi’s radical conversion has captured and inspired believers and non-believers.

His life remains a witness that true joy comes not from wealth but from humility, peace, and love.

### **War, Imprisonment, and God's Voice**

In 1202, Francis joined Assisi's forces against Perugia, only to be captured and imprisoned for nearly a year. Illness and humiliation shook his pride and left him questioning his life's purpose.

Still eager for knighthood, he set out in 1204 to join the Papal army in Apulia. On the road, he experienced a dream in which God asked: "Francis, who can do more for you, the master or the servant?" When Francis replied, "The master," God said: "Then why do you leave the master for the servant?" Realising God was calling him away from worldly glory, Francis returned home, bewildered but ready for a new path.

### **The Call to Rebuild the Church**

One day, while praying before the crucifix in the ruined chapel of San Damiano, Francis heard Christ speak: "Francis, go and repair my house, which you see is falling into ruin." Interpreting this literally, he sold cloth from his father's shop to pay for stones. Brought before the bishop by his enraged father, Francis publicly stripped off his clothes, declaring: "From now on, I have only one Father, who is in heaven."

*The emptiness of  
having everything  
changed to the joy of  
having nothing.*

This dramatic act marked his total embrace of poverty. He lived as a beggar, repairing chapels, serving lepers, and learning to find joy in simplicity. He called poverty "Lady Poverty" and loved her as his chosen bride.

### **The Joyful Beggar and His Companions**

Francis's authenticity in living the radicality of the Gospel soon drew others. While there were plenty of preachers in Francis's time, what drew people to him was perhaps the same thing when he was the "king of feasts" - his joy.

By 1209, he had gathered about a dozen followers who lived as *fratres minores*—"lesser

brothers"—owning nothing, begging for food, preaching repentance, and serving the poor.

*If his conversion  
happened today,  
it would be the  
equivalent of Kim  
Kardashian becoming  
Mother Teresa*

True joy comes from the wisdom that chasing wealth, fame, and glory often leads to emptiness, while detachment from worldly desires brings inner fulfilment. We see this wisdom play out with celebrities whose pursuit of worldly desires leads them to despair and addiction, whilst recovering addicts find healing through spiritual practices that teach them to find peace through detachment. Whilst many religions teach this wisdom, for Christians, the strength of detachment does not come from pure self-effort, but from humbly accepting the abundant love, friendship, and grace of Christ.

Francis composed a short rule of life, mostly from Gospel passages, and went to Rome to seek approval from Pope Innocent III. At first hesitant, the Pope dreamed of Francis holding up the crumbling Lateran Basilica, preventing its collapse. Convinced that this movement would renew the Church, he granted approval.

The Franciscan movement grew rapidly, spreading across Europe. Women joined under St Clare of Assisi, founding the Poor Clares, while lay people adopted Franciscan spirituality in daily life.

### **A Brother to All Creation**

Francis's love was not limited to people. He saw all creatures as brothers and sisters under God. This conviction gave rise to some of the most beloved stories in the *Fioretti* ("Little Flowers of St Francis").

One is the sermon to the birds. Seeing a flock by the roadside, Francis paused to preach: "My little sisters the birds, you ought to praise your Creator who gave you wings, freedom, and clothing of feathers."



**Giotto, The Confirmation of the Franciscan Rule, c. 1297–1300**

When Pope Innocent III blessed Francis and his humble band of followers, the Church gave formal sanction to a movement that would reshape medieval Christianity. Giotto's fresco commemorates this moment not in stiff symbolism but in vivid human encounter: the pope, the friars, the gestures, the faces. Through such scenes, Giotto not only helped canonise Francis's story in visual form but also pioneered the naturalism that would blossom into the Renaissance—a new way of seeing holiness in the real world.



The birds listened without fear until he finished and he blessed them.

Another tells of the wolf of Gubbio, which terrorised a town by attacking livestock and people. Francis went out to meet it, made the sign of the cross, and spoke: “Brother Wolf, you have done much evil. But if the townsfolk feed you, will you promise to harm no one?” The wolf bowed its head in submission and thereafter lived peacefully among the townspeople who cared for it until its death.

*He rebuilt the Church,  
not with stones but  
with example.*

Francis also gave the Church one of its greatest hymns of praise, the Canticum of the Creatures, sometimes called the Canticum of Brother Sun and Sister Moon. In it, he praises God through creation: “Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures, especially Brother Sun, who brings the day, and Sister Moon and the stars, so clear and precious and fair.” The Canticum embodies his vision of creation as one family bound together in praise of God.

Whether in sermon, song or legend,

these stories reveal how Francis embodied reconciliation with creation, restoring harmony where fear and violence had ruled.

### **Prophet of Peace**

Francis’s love also extended to enemies. In 1219, during the Fifth Crusade, he travelled to Egypt and crossed battle lines to meet the Muslim Sultan Al-Kamil. Instead of hostility, Francis approached with humility, speaking of peace. Though he did not convert the Sultan, their respectful dialogue defied the violence of the Crusades. St Bonaventure describes the encounter as an act of bold faith, one that showed Francis’s conviction that the Gospel is best preached through peace and witness, not the sword.

### **Sharing in Christ’s Suffering**

In later years, weakened by illness, Francis longed to be united more deeply with Christ. In 1224, while praying on Mount La Verna, he had a vision of the crucified Christ as a seraph. When the vision ended, Francis bore the stigmata—the wounds of Christ in his hands, feet, and side. He became the first known saint to share physically in Christ’s Passion.

Though in pain, Francis sang hymns of praise, completing the Canticum of the Creatures. In 1226, he died at the age of 44, lying on the bare earth near Assisi, bidding farewell to “Sister Death.”

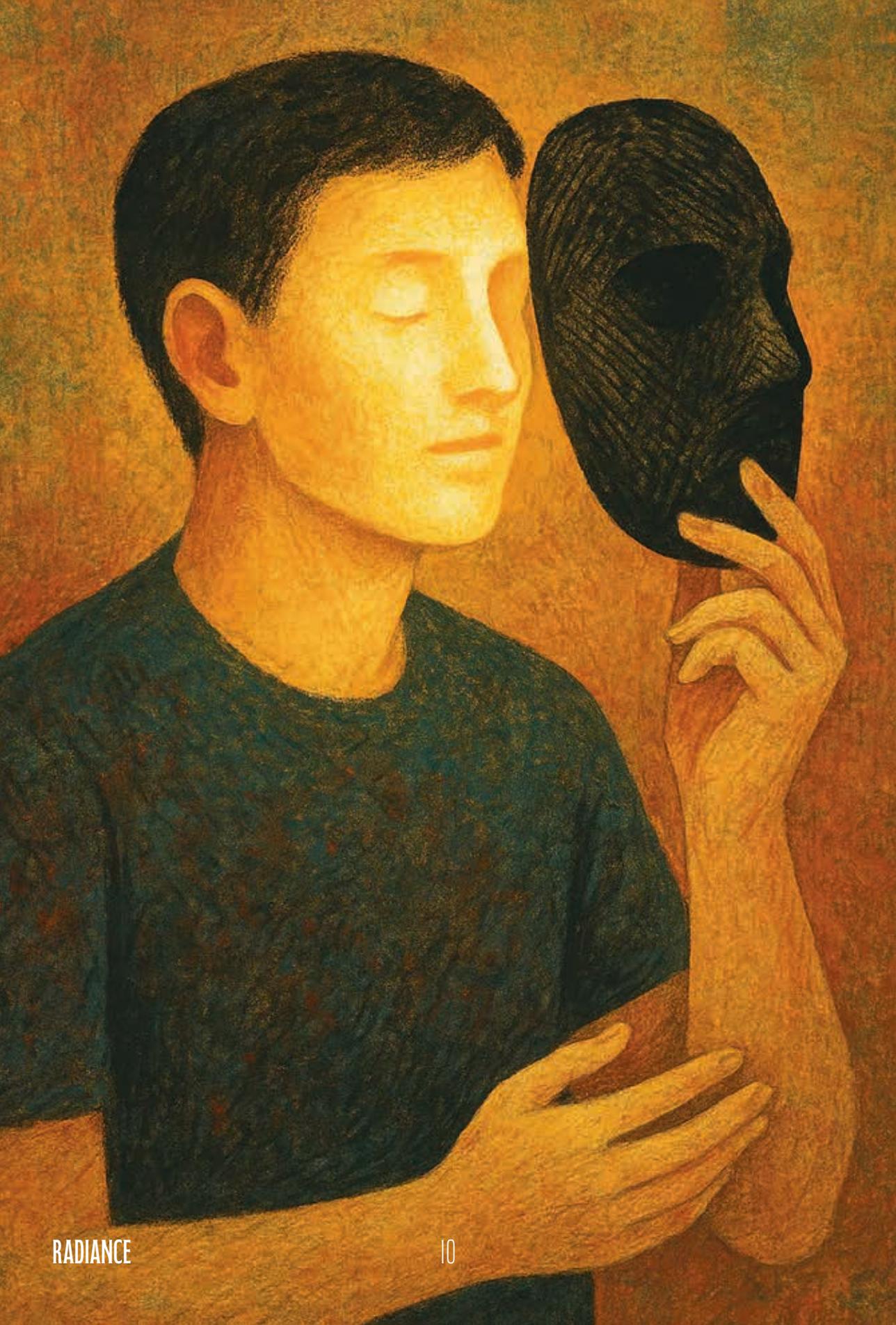
### **The legacy of St Francis**

The story of St Francis of Assisi is one of radical transformation. From playboy to prisoner, from ambitious knight to joyful beggar, from preacher of peace to stigmatised mystic, Francis lived the Gospel with disarming simplicity. He rebuilt the Church not with stones but with example, drawing followers who carried his vision across the world.

He spoke to birds, tamed wolves, embraced lepers, sought peace with Muslims, and saw in every creature the face of a brother or sister. In poverty, he found joy; in suffering, he found union with Christ.

For a world still restless with wealth, conflict, and ecological crisis, Francis remains a timeless witness. He reminds us that true joy does not come from possessions or power, but from humility, peace, and harmony with God’s creation. ♦





*You are Seen. You are Loved.*

# WHAT IF WE COULD LIVE WITHOUT SHAME?

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*Shame insists we must hide. Christ says: show your face, and I will clothe you with light.*

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by *Gabriel Olearnik*

**A**re we not always and everywhere ashamed? In our age of idols—sex, success, perfection—shame shadows us constantly.

Sex, once an adventure of lovers, has been reduced to performance. We hide from our bodies, from the fold of skin, the dimple, the scars, the parts we judge inadequate.

We hide from the lies we believed, and even more from the lies we told ourselves.

Shame is diminishment. It reminds us of what we are not, of what we failed to be, of the un-lived life that bends our souls inward, turning us into prisoners of the self.

It is nakedness, vulnerability—the anticipatory wound of body, mind, or soul. It is fear.

It is self-rejection. And here, the question arises: can there be a way out?

## **Naming Shame**

Brené Brown, who has studied shame for decades, puts it plainly: “The less we talk about shame, the more control it has over our lives.” Silence is its power source. Naming shame—simply saying, “I feel ashamed”—is an act of rebellion. It cracks open the dark chamber where shame hides and lets in the first shaft of light.

Shame whispers: you are unworthy; if they saw the real you, they would turn away. But once we name it, we are no longer alone in the dark.

## **Accompaniment**

The next step is accompaniment. Shame urges us to hide, but healing begins when we risk letting someone in—a friend, a counsellor, a loved one—who listens without judgment.

And in that vulnerable intimacy, a small miracle

Oleg Korolev "Prodigal Son"  
(fragment). Oil, Canvas,  
130 x 90cm, 2005



occurs. The thing we most dreaded—being seen and still loved—happens. Someone stays. Someone says, “Me too. You are not alone.”

Empathy is the antidote. In the presence of true companionship, shame falters. Its voice grows quieter as another voice rises stronger: you are loved, even here, even in this.

### Beyond the Human

But even these holy moments of human love do not erase shame overnight. After the conversation ends, in the quiet of your bed—or in the stillness of the bath—the old shadows creep back. Naming shame and finding empathy are crucial first steps, but they are not the final cure.

They point beyond themselves.

Every safe presence, every empathetic word, reflects a deeper love—the love of God. Human intimacy is a glimmer of a greater intimacy, a divine empathy that reaches to the root of our shame. This is not reducible to words. It is discovered, slowly, in prayer, in beauty, in mystery: further in and further up, as Lewis wrote, in forests alive with sunlight and waters lapping the shore.

### The Robe of Glory

A few years ago, I worked with painter Oleg Korolev on a variant of his *Prodigal Son*. In it, the father is a living flame—not destructive but illuminating, prodigious, inexhaustible. Out of that flame emanate eyes, stars, pearls: symbols of a love that calls us out of darkness into reality. In that touch, shame’s rags are transfigured into a robe of glory.

The caress of the father’s hand upon the child’s face is personal, tender, reconstituting. It restores what was fading, transforms what was breaking, and draws the child into likeness with the father.

The son is also a daughter. The child is also me. And you.

Shame tells us we must hide. The Gospel says: you are seen - and still loved.

To live without shame is not to live without wounds. It is to let those wounds be touched by Love Himself, until the garment of shame catches fire and becomes glory.

Until we have faces, we are not truly ourselves. ♦





*Why the Saints Walked—and Why it Still Matters*

# FLÂNEURS OF FAITH

How wandering friars turned walking into a theology of freedom

by *Fr Kevin O'Donnell*

**A**n elderly relative of mine once shook his head while passing Brighton Pier: “All those people, milling about, nothing to do but look at their hands!” For him, walking meant adventure—straying into forests, stumbling into festivals, even getting lost up a mountain in the mist. Walking was never idle. It was life, movement, discovery.

The French once had a word for those who stroll aimlessly: flâneurs. Nineteenth-century Parisians used it to describe those who wandered the boulevards with no destination, simply watching the world pass by. But not all who walk are flâneurs. Some walk with purpose. Jesus himself sent his disciples out on the road with these instructions: “Carry no purse, no haversack, no extra sandals... I am sending you out like lambs among wolves” (Luke 10:3–4). He walked. They walked. So must we.

Walking can be philosophy in motion—an integration of body and spirit, breath and horizon. Sometimes it is protest: think of Gandhi’s Salt March, or Martin Luther King Jr. striding across Selma’s bridge. Their walks were not idle; they were embodied truth-telling, a holy foolishness that risked vulnerability to expose deeper freedom.

## The Holy Fools of the Middle Ages

Christianity, too, has known its holy fools—wandering friars who turned their poverty and joy into a witness. They were, in their way, spiritual flâneurs: itinerant preachers who trusted in providence, spoke truth to power, and found peace on the road.

Francis of Assisi is the most famous. He stripped naked in the marketplace to renounce his wealthy father, preached to birds, and sang troubadour

songs transformed into Gospel. He courted Lady Poverty with the ardour of a knight seeking his beloved.

Dominic de Guzmán, offered the prestige of a bishop's seat, refused. Instead, he walked humbly among heretics and lapsed Christians, speaking simply, living poorly, and founding a community of preachers whose motto remains: *Laudare, Benedicere, Praedicare*—to praise, to bless, to preach.

*Structure gives freedom; rhythm gives grace. The saints understood that walking is a way of praying.*

The Carmelites, who once had ties to crusading knights, abandoned the sword for the Well of Elijah. They formed a community of contemplation on Mount Carmel, drinking deeply from silence and prayer before spreading across Europe as mendicants of peace.

All three movements turned away from the romance of worldly knighthood and became, instead, knights errant of the spirit. In an age of troubadours, they sang of another Lady—Our Lady—and their affections were shaped by the chaste, ardent language of the Song of Songs.

#### **Charisms: Keys That Unlock**

Each of these orders carried a charism—not a project or an ambition, but a gift. St Peter received the keys of the kingdom; Francis, the charism of peace and brotherhood with creation; Dominic, the charism of truth spoken in clarity and study; Carmelites, the charism of silence and contemplative prayer.

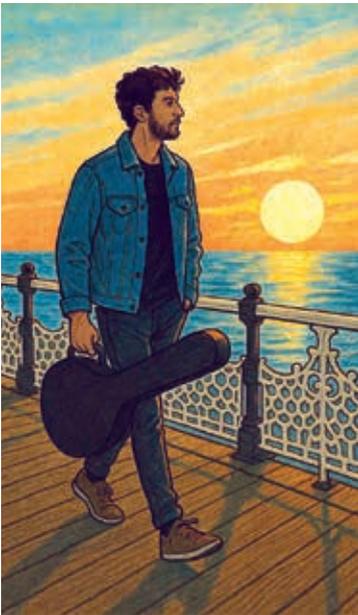
These gifts are not rivals but complements, like different voices in a single choir. Over time, rivalry and property disputes would come to mar them—but at their best, they reveal how Christ calls each person and each community in a unique way. Together they unlock something no one could open alone.

#### **Walking with Christ**

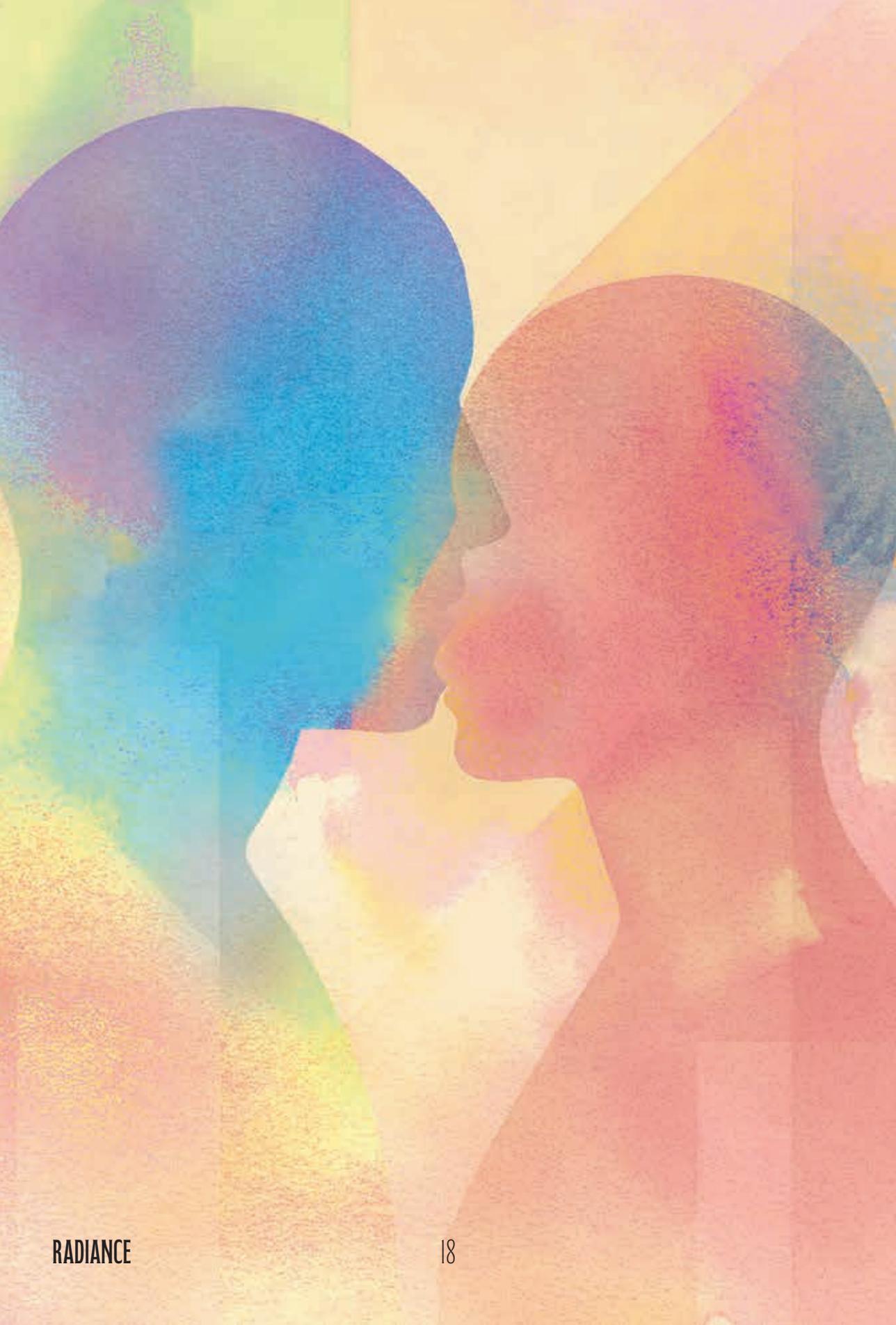
There is an icon of the Beloved Disciple in which Christ wraps his arm gently around John's shoulder, their eyes gazing outward as one. It is a reminder that to follow Christ is not to walk alone but to walk embraced.

So it was with Francis, Dominic, and the Carmelites. They walked roads both literal and spiritual—roads that led them into villages, forests, marketplaces, courts, and deserts. They walked vulnerable, often poor, but always with the Lord.

To walk, in their footsteps, is to embrace our own charism, our own foolishness for Christ. To risk being misunderstood. To wander not aimlessly, but faithfully. To move because Christ moves, and to walk because He walks. ♦







## *Faith and Relationship Anxiety*

# TO BELIEVE YOU ARE LOVED

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*Why our craving for reassurance in love mirrors our deeper struggle to trust — and how faith becomes the only cure for doubt.*

---

by *James Surry*

**T**hree messages at breakfast and nothing since. A knot of familiar unease stirred in the cavity of his chest. His wife had been gone for several days, and the scant few words she had sent to him seemed the only testament that she was still thinking of him.

She had gone to see old friends back home for a week, and he had stayed behind.

He was stuck with an enduring sense of being second best.

His eyes retrace the shape of the words in front of him. Who is she seeing today? Is she seeing him? Will she remain faithful? He tries to dig deeper, to imagine the hypothetical Fact beneath the text. Each time a new meaning is found: a lectio divina of sorts, but shorn of all faith.

Perhaps he could call; surely, he could think of a reason to. His mind runs through various plans

to elicit from her just one more small token of her feelings towards him; one final reassurance of her faithfulness.

A part of him fears the possibility that her promise of love was merely a feeling, rather than a vow; even with all the evidence of the past, his reasoning fails to silence the narrative, and the passage of time renders his memory of her love less credible than before.

By now, he feels that nothing less than holding her body close to him would be able to assuage this gnawing doubt. Yet he forgets that even four days ago, as she lay beside him in the early morning light, he knew at a deeper level that her freedom would always frustrate any attempt to force the certainty of her love.

Behind her eyes lay a world of mystery for which no proof, without faith, could ever suffice.

### Love Resists Possession

Love! Here, the tyrant and the anxious lover find a mutual nemesis. Of all things, love remains free from all coercion, all control: its very nature exists in freedom itself, over and against all the powers and violence of the human will, opposed to any compulsion. It is an elusiveness that, without faith, may drive him into the sickness of despair.

That she does indeed love him, with an enduring and faithful love, could make little difference. It made little difference to all those who had gone before him, driven mad by their inability to receive the evidence of another's love on the basis of faith. Anna Karenina's failure to receive the evidence of Vronsky's love ended in tragedy. Like her, she sought to possess what can only be received as a gift. Her method—seeking control and possession—is incommensurable with that which it seeks. It is like measuring a particle's position, which necessarily renders knowledge of its momentum uncertain: the attempt of observation itself makes the truth sought inaccessible. But unlike most exercises in physics, the attempt to calculate the love of another can often break the human heart.

*Love cannot be measured,  
only received.*

We can only go so far in intuiting the love of another before we must assent to their love in faith. If you have ever opened yourself up to the possibility that you are loved by another—by a parent, friend, or partner—you have already lived based on faith. The love of another presents us with what is known as an 'epistemic gap'—a space where we cannot have direct access to information or truth. When a mother stays up through the night with her child, when a friend shows up during your darkest hour, when a lover proposes, these are revelations—empirical evidence, even—of an interior reality that you cannot directly access. The evidence points toward love, but evidence can only take us so far. There remains that epistemic gap that only the assent of faith can bridge.

### The Faith We Already Practice

We live by this faith constantly, often without realizing it. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are creatures who practice faith whenever we hold a belief that we are loved by another. Without this faith, we cannot enter into relationships of love—instead, we become anxious, manipulative, and maddened. St John Henry Newman observed that without faith, we necessarily descend into a life marked by scepticism: "Resolve to believe nothing, and you must prove your proofs and analyse your elements, sinking further and further, and finding 'in the lowest depth a lower deep,' till you come to the broad bosom of scepticism". On our quest to





possess total certainty, we may even deny that love exists at all.

For the Christian, love is the most fundamental reality of existence. We believe that God, who is Love itself, freely loves creation and calls each person to receive that love. We believe that every genuine instance of human love—the parent’s sacrifice, the friend’s loyalty, the spouse’s dedication—reflects and is caused by this divine love.

This love is manifest in the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Christian faith, at its core, is an openness to such love: it is not only intellectual assent to propositions about God (or His love for creation), but also the receptive posture that allows Love itself to be received as a gift. The radical freedom of love means that the love of God can never be proven as a calculation could, never rationalised as necessary: it can only be received through the same faith by which we receive the love of others. In the receptivity of faith, we eschew all force and allow love to reveal itself as wholly trustworthy.

### **From Doubt to Devotion**

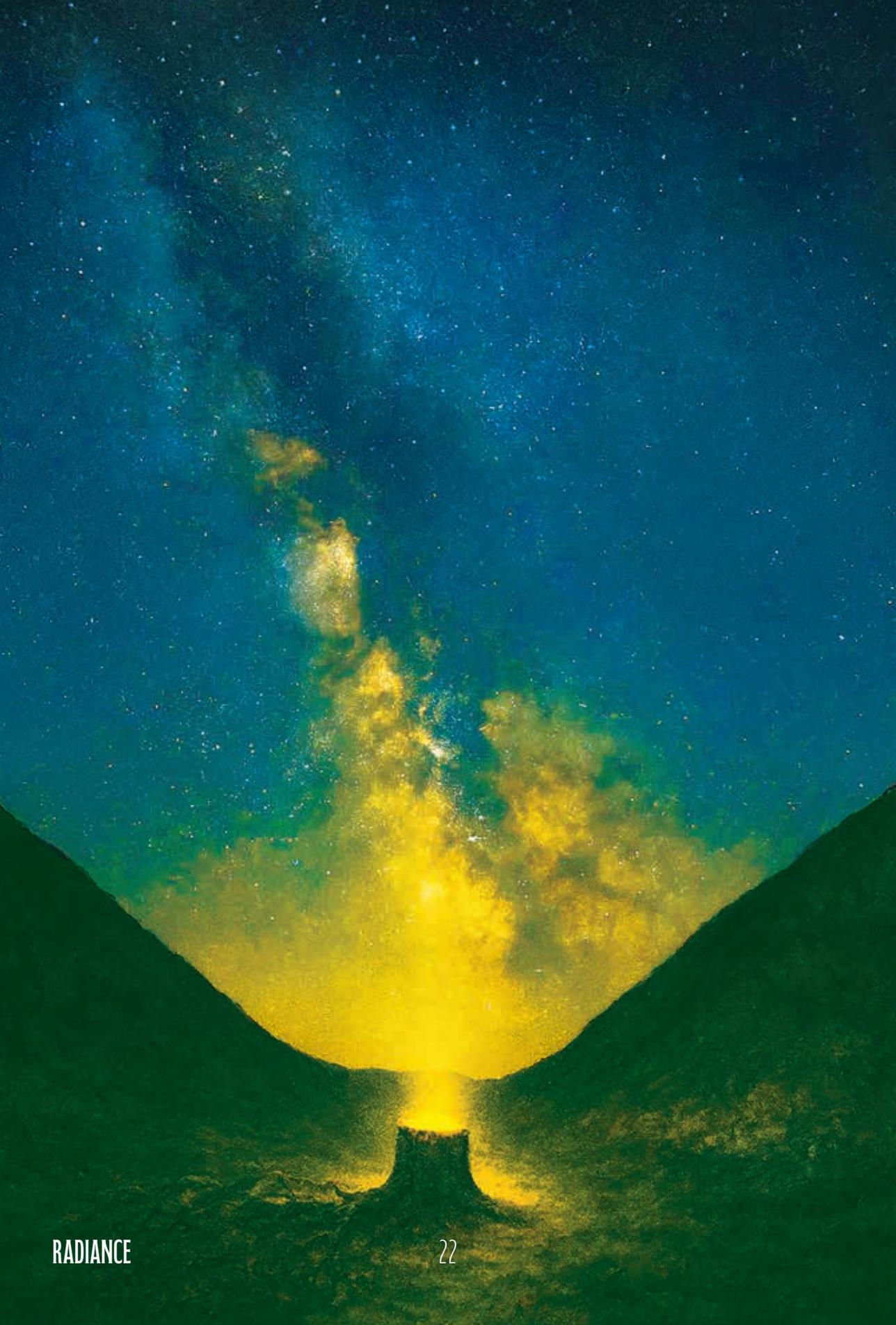
It is to Mary that Christians look for their model of faith. Throughout the life of Christ—from the annunciation of his birth, to his death and resurrection—Mary received the tidings and workings of God in perfect conviction of His love for her. Here is faith in its fullness,

the open receptivity of one who allows love to penetrate her fully. Her assent becomes the foundation of the Church precisely because it models how divine love must be received: freely, trustingly, with the same faith that we exercise when we allow ourselves to be loved by another human being.

Like Mary, *“those who believe are transformed by the love to which they have opened their hearts in faith. By their openness to this offer of primordial love, their lives are enlarged and expanded... The self-awareness of the believer now expands because of the presence of another; it now lives in this other and thus, in love, life takes on a whole new breadth.”* (Lumen Fidei 21).

Without the faith of Mary, we can never surrender to the love that longs to transform us. Like the anxious lover scrying the screen of his phone, we are likely to get caught up scrutinising the words and actions of our beloved ad infinitum. Without the receptivity required for love’s radical freedom, we will struggle to bear to live in the space where it actually exists, refusing and suffocating the very thing that our hearts desire.

But the gnawing unease that we will then find in ourselves and our relationships is in fact an invitation to entrust ourselves to another. It is the invitation to put the phone down, not in defeat, but in faith, and to rest in the quiet, unprovable, and wholly free gift of being loved. ♦



*The Tree that Fell Twice*

# SILENCE AT THE SYCAMORE GAP

On vandalism, the Fall, and why even our ruins whisper of redemption

by *Tom W. McGrath*

**T**he wind pressed against the stones of Hadrian's Wall and rattled about our ears, as we carefully ascended the western bank of the Sycamore Gap. As this was some weeks after the event, we knew what awaited us as we peered down to where the Sycamore had once stood. But we were all still shocked into silence.

Not felled by storm or age but cut clean through by human hands. The curved valley that had once framed its silhouette now looked wounded.

As the place where the Sycamore tree, the Roman Wall, and the starry skies of Northumberland had met, this was a confluence of nature, history, and the heavens themselves. Framed by the constellations, and cherished by the locals, this was a spot where the creativity of God and humanity danced together.

Now only its likeness remains—on postcards,

local beer labels, school crests. The stump itself has become a reminder of how easily beauty can be undone, and how our stewardship of our landscapes can unravel.

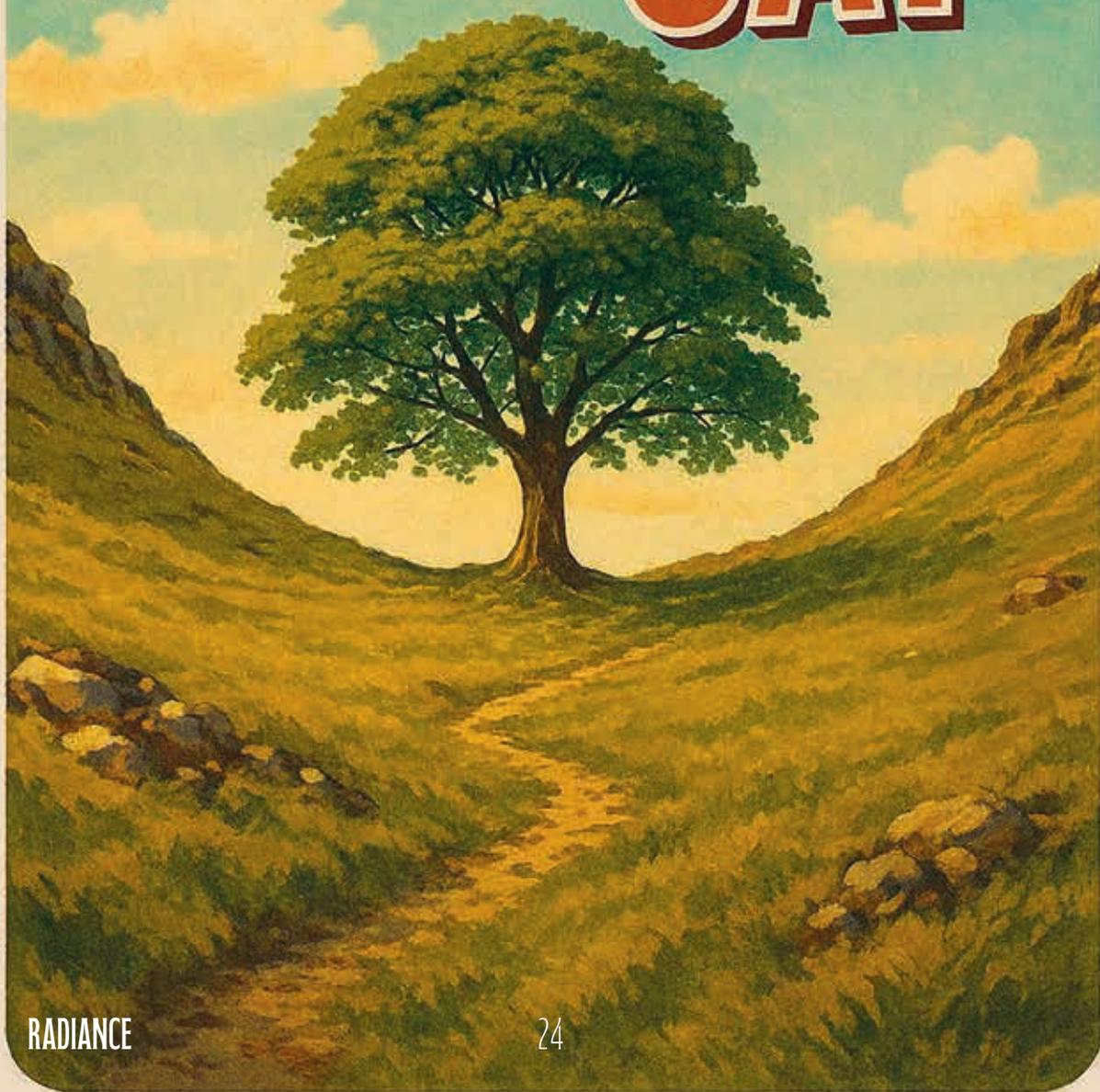
There was no manifesto, no grievance, not even an explanation behind the act. Being so unnecessary and mindless made it sting even more.

## **The Problem Behind the Axe**

I tell myself I shouldn't be surprised. Humanity has been doing this sort of thing from the beginning—seeing something good and deciding to destroy it.

The Christian story of evil begins, of course, with a tree: the one forbidden in Eden, whose fruit promised knowledge and power. When Adam and Eve reached for the apple in the hope of becoming 'like God', they overturned the relationship between Creator and creature.

*Greetings from*  
**THE SYCAMORE  
GAP**



Something fundamental splintered. From that moment, humanity became what theology calls fallen: still free, still capable of good, but pulled towards sin.

As history shows, this pull has often led us to destroy all that reflects ultimate good and beauty.

*The tree's shadow  
remains—in symbols,  
in treasured memories,  
and in a renewed  
determination to  
protect what is worth  
saving for posterity.*

Catholic thought—building on Plato—sees God as the very form of Beauty: not merely possessing beauty but being its source. Everything beautiful participates in His beauty: a painter's use of light to depict the dawn; a flower petal's fragile beauty; the sound of hymns sung from the heart; the sway of an old Sycamore at a gap in the Wall.

When we destroy beauty, we destroy the reflection of our Creator. It is a symptom of our condition. This is what fallen people do.

### **The Second Tree**

But the Christian story is also a story of two trees. While the tree of Eden was the instrument of our sin against the Creator; the second tree, of the Crucifixion, was that of salvation for the created.

The cross—hewn from this second tree—became the inversion of Eden. Upon it, Christ bore the weight of human violence and transformed it into mercy. As Saint Paul wrote, “For just as by one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:19).

In doing so, the tool of our undoing became the means of our salvation.

### **Beauty, Broken and Redeemed**

When I pass the Gap now, I still feel the sting. But I've begun to see its absence differently.

The tree's shadow remains—in symbols, in treasured memories, and in a renewed determination to protect what is worth saving for posterity. These fragments show that while beauty may be cut down, it cannot be erased. Like grace, it finds a way.

The Crucifix tells the same story. It is a symbol of the greatest evil humanity ever committed—the killing of God Himself. Yet Christians lift it high in procession and hang it over altars and in their homes.

The same image that reveals our capacity for destruction also reveals the immensity of divine love.

That is the paradox of the Cross—and of the fallen tree. What we destroy, God can redeem. What we wound, He can heal.

### **A Living Symbol**

The stump at the Sycamore Gap may never regrow as it once was. Some losses remain losses. But it has become a new sort of icon, a reminder that creation cries out for its restoration.

The first tree in the Christian story led to our exile; the second opens the way home. Between them, every act of senseless harm becomes intelligible—not excusable, but held within a story that ends in renewal.

*When we destroy  
beauty, we destroy  
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condition. This is  
what fallen people do.*

In the future, when I walk the Wall, the valley will still look wounded. But the grassy fields will sway in the breeze; the dew will sing in morning light; the sky will still be whole; and the stars will shine in the night. And I'll remember that, even when beauty is threatened, it cannot finally be silenced. ♦



*What the Welfare State Cannot Give-and Quietly Takes Away*

# IMPERSONAL COMPASSION: THE GAZE WE LOST

How the welfare state's collective mercy can be subtly de-personalising, allowing us to look away from those who need our attention.

by *Marie Moore*

**I**n the areas where I live and work in London, homelessness is both common and visible. I see people asking for money at the station near my flat, on the tube, at the station close to my office and sitting outside the shops I pass on my short walk to get there. Having spent much of my childhood in suburbs where rough sleeping was rare, it was an unpleasant shock to see its prevalence when I moved to London. I found it concerning - even upsetting at times. A couple of months after arriving I recall speaking quite sharply, almost shouting at someone when he began ridiculing a man begging on the tube.

Yet now, however, many years later, I don't experience the same reaction. I fear my commute would be torturous if I stopped to consider the chain of events that caused each homeless

person I pass to be where he or she is today, hoping for some change, or food or a simple look of acknowledgement. What difference could I possibly make in their lives? And besides, aren't there government services for people like this, who have evidently fallen on hard times? Being a few generations into ubiquitous public services seems to have reduced our capacity for personal mercy. What began as collective compassion has, in some sense, made charity impersonal.

In the story of progress that much of the liberal West likes to tell itself, one of the most important strands is the development of the modern welfare state. Recounting the UK's particular version of this tale must include first and foremost a reverential account of the National Health Service, then perhaps the

construction of social housing and maybe a mention of the state pension and unemployment benefits. Between these, a person will theoretically never have to suffer the indignities of untreated illness, homelessness or poverty, in what some may see as a secular answer to the Bible's command to care for the widow, the orphan, the poor.

### **The Ghost of Christian Charity**

As any number of books on the subject can attest, the UK has a long history of Christian movements and reformers who campaigned for the skeleton of what would become our contemporary welfare state. According to Nick Spencer of the Theos think tank, even Clement Attlee's postwar welfare offer "was less a spotless bride than a Frankenstein's monster stitched together from pre-existing provision and institutions," many of these founded by men and women whose faith called them to help the poor and unwell. They were part of a long tradition of Christian charity which saw the church founding the first hospitals centuries ago.

*To meet a stranger's eyes in the street  
may not change the world, but it  
rescues us, for a moment, from the  
welfare state's greatest curse: the  
permission not to look.*

Nothing analogous had previously existed even in the great ancient civilisations; for all the Roman Empire's clean water and straight roads, there were no public hospitals.

The benefits of our current welfare state that evolved from the postwar settlement are obvious, yet if Saint Paul was correct when he asserted, quoting Jesus, that "it is better to give than to receive," we might ask ourselves whether we are in some ways worse off without so many opportunities to give. Yes, a person can still donate to charity, and there is sadly still plenty of unmet need across the country, but it is both easy and reassuring to say to oneself, when confronted with the sight of someone who needs material help, that it is government's responsibility and I already pay my taxes. Knowing the state is there to step in removes the moral imperative to care for the poor that was perhaps more keenly felt in the past.

### **From Compassion to Convenience**

Those who receive may also feel something is missing. Benefits such as Universal Credit and social housing are certainly useful, but they only meet a material need. The state



does not, and arguably cannot, support a person's emotional and spiritual wellbeing. While not working directly for these services, I have worked in close enough proximity to them to know that it is rare for people to come away from an interaction with anyone assessing or administering benefits and feel like their difficult situation was truly understood.

The welfare system's impersonal nature has also arguably contributed to the significant numbers of working age adults who are neither in employment nor seeking it and instead manage to get by on benefits. Most of us would feel concern for a friend spending a long period without any meaningful activity to fill his days, but when government ministers discuss the issue, it is almost always out of concern for the enormous cost to the state this entails. Consider too the toll it takes on individuals spending many months, if not years, feeling like they are a drain on society. Without the welfare state it simply would not be possible for such large numbers of people to be inactive, and everyone else would have a greater obligation to find a way to integrate them into daily life, appreciating the contributions they can make.

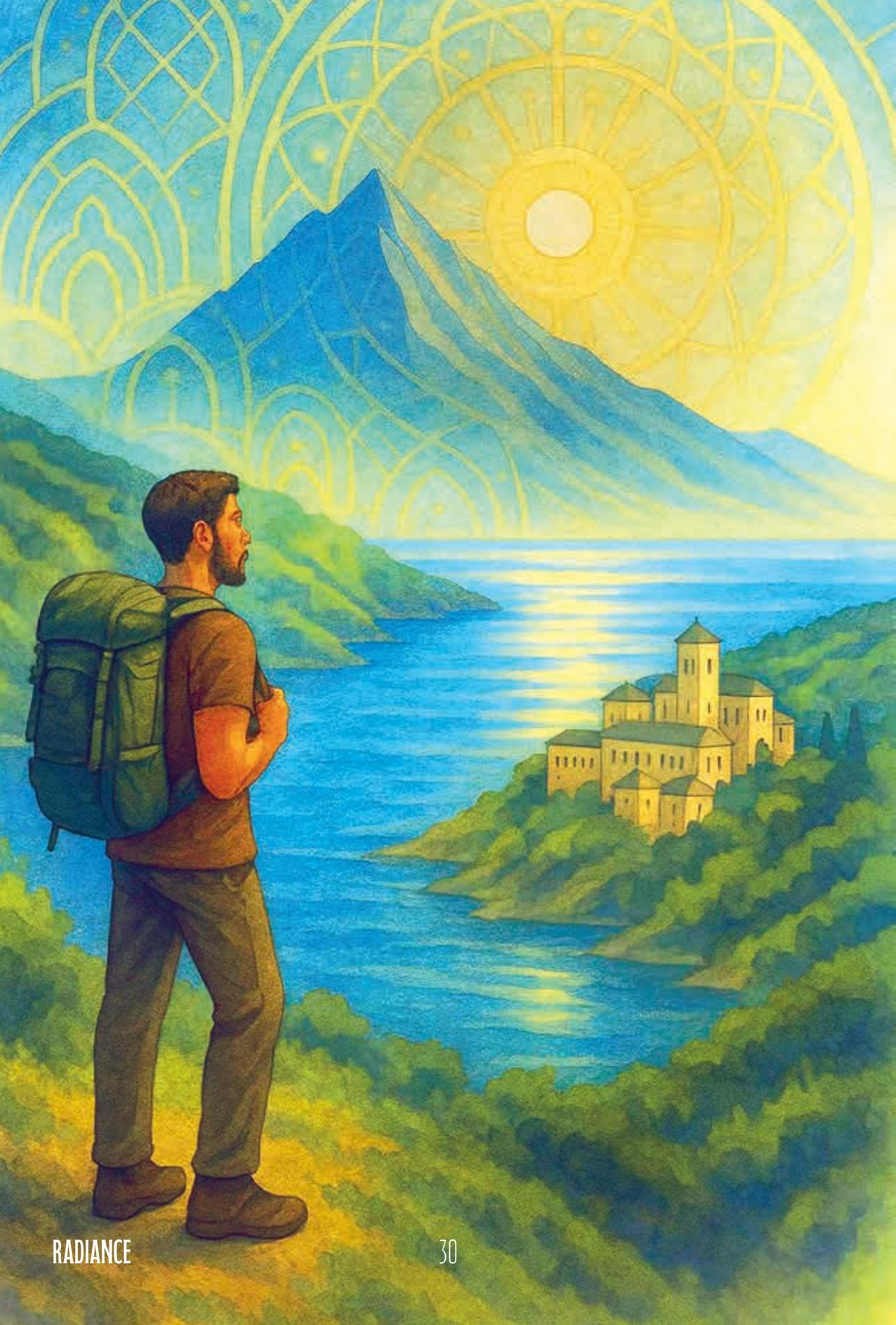
For employees working in the system, it is challenging to avoid becoming numb to the

harassed and frustrated people they encounter every day. In contrast, the help we are called to give in the Bible is emotional as much as material. When we give our time or money directly to an individual it is difficult not to feel some level of human connection. Twentieth century philosopher and mystic Simone Weil wrote that:

***to contemplate the woes of others without turning away one's gaze; not only that of one's eyes, but also that of one's attention, as a result of revolt, sadism, or some inner consolation of one kind or another—that is beautiful.***

This temptation to turn away that she describes is surely the feeling most of us experience when avoiding eye contact as we pass someone begging outside a shop. On the other hand, the beauty that comes on the seldom occasions that I do manage to "contemplate" those woes is something I can never experience by paying my taxes or even donating to charity.

Whether one believes or not, the Christian insistence on seeing the face of Christ in the poor remains one of civilisation's most radical ideas. To meet a stranger's eyes in the street may not change the world, but it rescues us, for a moment, from the welfare state's greatest curse: the permission not to look. ♦



*What Pilgrimage Reveals When Life Falls Apart*

# VAGABONDING WITH PURPOSE

.....  
*A young monk tells the story of his first—and totally unplanned—pilgrimage and reflects on the way a divine message can appear if you let the journey touch your soul.*  
.....

by *David Copan*

**M**y first pilgrimage wasn't planned by me. It happened to me. In 2014, I came to Greece for work—and within days, I lost everything: job, home, even my return ticket. I was in shock, adrift, with no idea where to go. A friend texted bluntly: "I hope you meet new friends—since everyone else just abandoned you."

And somehow, that's what unfolded. In a land of ancient Christian tradition—monasteries, relics, holy sites—the saints themselves became my friends.

### **At the Grave of Saint Paisios**

Through a friend of a friend, I ended up at a monastery in Thessaloniki where the relics of Saint Paisios (1924–1994), one of modern Orthodoxy's most beloved monks, are kept.

Having just lost everything, I doubted it would mean much. But at the saint's grave, I cried out: "God, if you're there, just help me not to die."

And I heard a voice: "Welcome to Greece. Everything will be okay."

I was stunned. But those words of comfort gave me the strength to keep living.

### **The Radiance of Mount Athos**

Through my new friends—on earth and in heaven—I travelled to Mount Athos, a thousand-year-old monastic republic off Greece's coast, often called the spiritual heart of Orthodoxy. More than 2,000 monks live there, rising at 2 am for hours of prayer.

Life began to shine again. The world felt alive, bursting with light.

A hermit named Fr. Makarios welcomed me,

listened as I poured out my story, and then prayed with me through the night. When he blessed me, warmth and joy surged through my body like a wave. By morning the feeling had faded, but I had seen what prayer could do—what it might open, if given everything.

For three months, I wandered the Greek mountains with all I owned in one backpack. I lived on lentils and rice. When I had nothing left, strangers pressed money into my hands so I could keep going. God provided through the hands of others.



*When we are most empty, we step out toward the sacred—and God steps toward us.*

The Athonite monks never spoke of their pasts; when asked where they were from, they simply said: “From the mercy of God.” In those months, I came to understand what that meant.

Eventually, through the help of one monk, a path opened. My period of homeless wandering ended. A new life began.

#### **Lourdes: A Chosen Pilgrimage**

But pilgrimage doesn't always begin in catastrophe.

Years later, struggling with addiction, a friend suggested we go to Lourdes, in southern France—the site where the Virgin Mary appeared to a peasant girl in 1858. Millions have journeyed there seeking healing and hope.

This time, unlike my vagabonding in Greece, we booked tickets and a hotel. But what awaited us was no less profound.

I was struck by the crowds: thousands from every continent, carrying candles in procession from the grotto where Mary appeared to the vast basilica built in her honour. We sang together in the night, a global chorus of prayer.

I cannot point to one moment that changed me. But in the entirety of the experience, something awakened again. A light kindled in my heart. I knew that, with God's help, I could face the long work of leaving addiction behind.

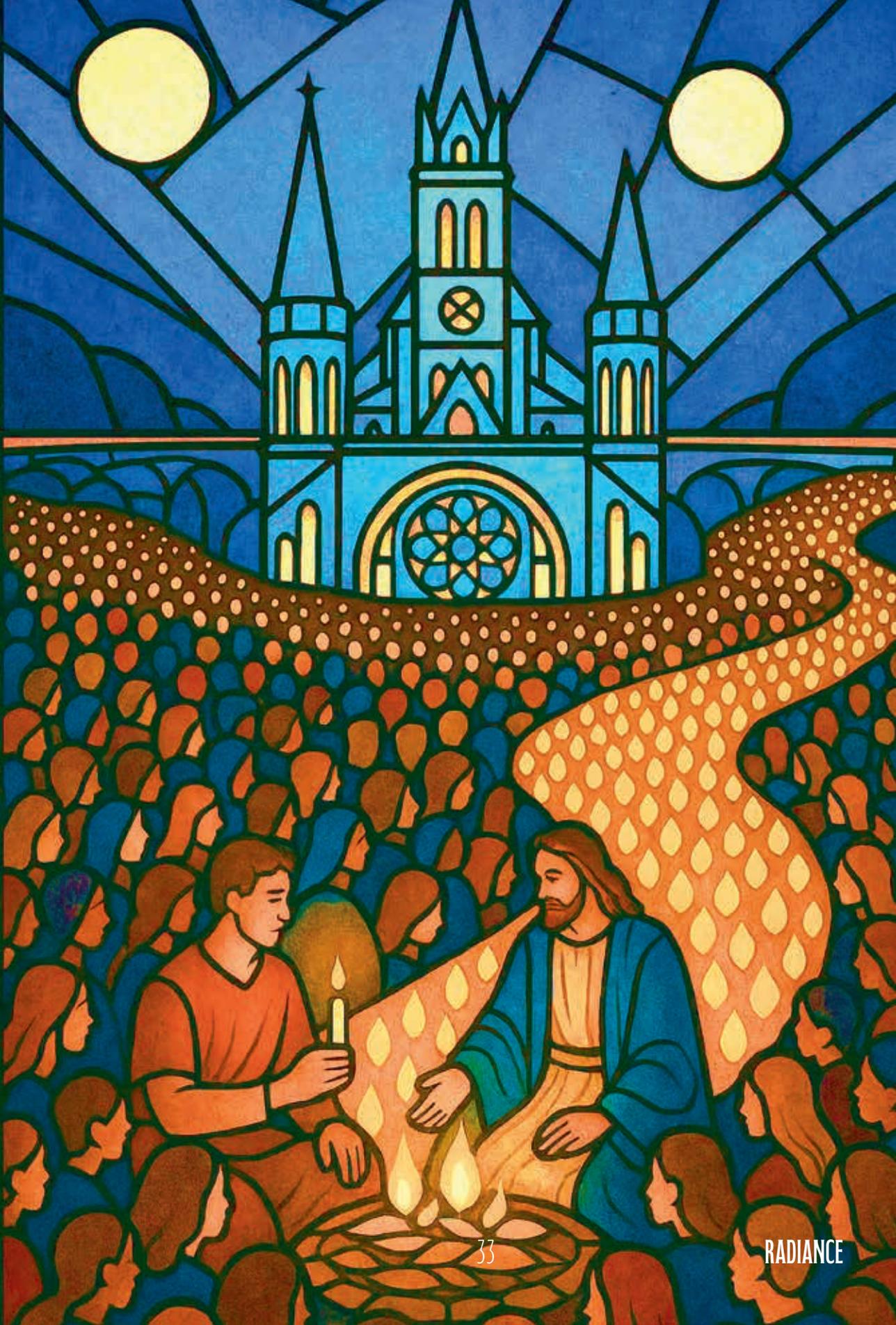
#### **What Pilgrimage Reveals**

This is a pilgrimage: new life, new hope.

When we are most empty, we step out toward the sacred—and God steps toward us. We may not hear voices or witness miracles. But grace flows, quietly filling us, and we carry it back into our lives.

When we show up, God shows up. ♦







## *How Structure Can Be Liberating*

# THE STARTLING FREEDOM OF FORM

At their worst, rules and rituals can be stifling. At their best, they can free our souls to plumb the depths of sacred mysteries.

by *Leo McGrath*

**Is all religious organisation just a way for people to control one another? It's a fair question. The Church is, after all, a human organisation. And like any human structure, it has been misused. Abuse, corruption, and cover-ups are a matter of record. In recent decades, the sexual abuse crisis revealed how often the institution protected itself instead of its victims.**

Go back further and you can trace how religious structures were entangled with colonialism, crusades, and conflict. The New Atheists weren't wrong to call this out. But they were wrong to think that abandoning organised religion altogether would solve the problem. In fact, unchecked individualism, hyper-capitalism, and the conformist forces of social media have rushed in to replace it and left us lonelier and more adrift than ever.

So, what if organisations, with their rules and rituals, aren't prisons but a kind of liberation?

### **Why Christians Organise**

In the Gospels, Jesus tells Peter: "You are the rock on which I will build my Church." Christians have debated for centuries what exactly he meant, but most have consistently agreed on this: there should be a Church. A single meeting place, with rhythms and practices which bend our lives towards good, but also a community which can encourage, console and inspire.

Why? Because living well is not easy. We are free beings, uniquely gifted with reason and choice. Yet that freedom is also fragile, our will brittle. Only a blessed few can live well by their own lights. By those rhythms and practices, Christians believed they could

better discern their choices, order their lives and find the strength to live accordingly.

### When Freedom Begets Fragmentation

In the modern West we tend to understand freedom as maximal liberty to choose without restraint, so long as no one is harmed. After sixty years of this as our highest value, it's worth asking whether we are any happier than under the stifling religious orthodoxy of before.

The evidence isn't exactly encouraging. Levels of loneliness and anxiety are high. Our attention is captured and monetised by the endless scroll of TikTok and Instagram. The logic of the market has colonised even our relationships, often reducing them to transactions that leave us yearning for something essential and true. As C.S. Lewis once warned, long before the smartphone: "We live, in fact, in a world starved for solitude, silence, and privacy: and therefore starved for meditation and true friendship."

*Faith unfolds in silence and solitude,  
yes, but also in the communal  
action and imitation of others.*

In that talk (entitled *Membership*) Lewis also cautioned against two dangers: crushing collectivism that erases individuality and the excessive elevation of the individual in spiritual and personal matters that leaves us isolated. Both result in diminished reserves of the stuff that makes life worth living - freedom and companionship.

We can observe both today; in the way global fashion, social platforms, and even cosmetic trends begin to look eerily the same from Dubai to Dublin, and in the way we are sold a radical individualism that demands we invent meaning in the pursuit of authenticity.

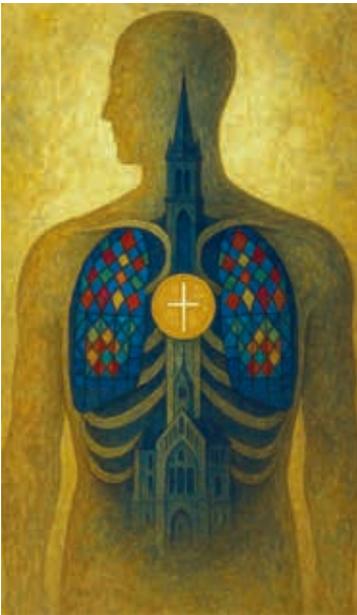
If you too have experienced this tension, it might be worth considering what organised religion can offer.

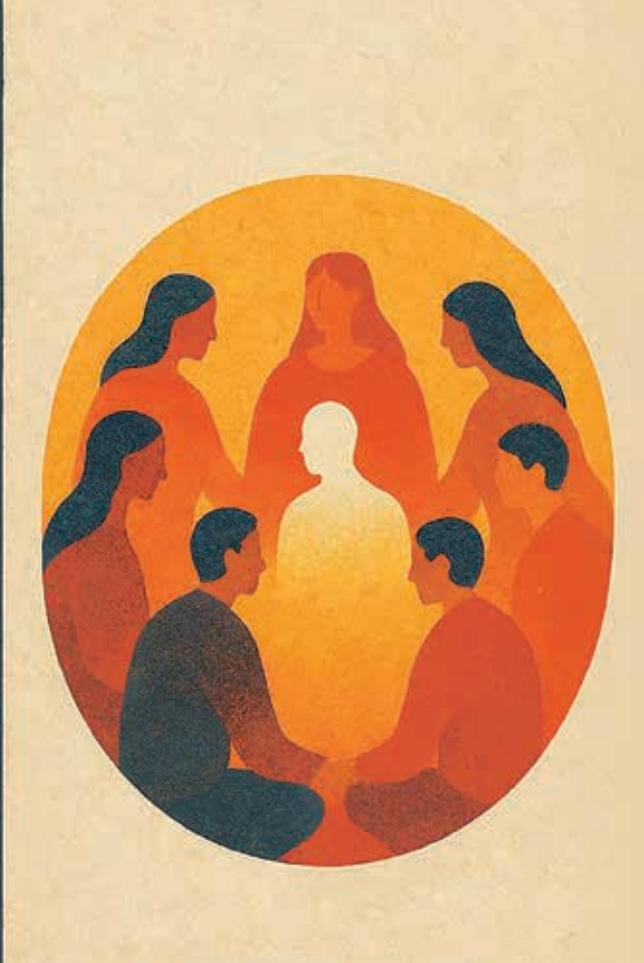
### Why Structure Can Help

The paradox of structure is that it binds us in order to set us free.

Think of a poem: it needs meter and rhyme to come together. A building needs symmetry and proportion to stand. Even those poets or architects that subvert these rules are only impactful because everyone knows the rules that were broken. Tension is created by the subversion of the structure people are familiar with. Think of the 'inside out' design of the Lloyds building in London, which lands its impact because we can all picture what a building should look like, and it hits us with the opposite.

Post-modern architects, and many culture-makers in our society, gained the freedom to shock from the rules that would bind them. But undermine those rules too much and they may





cease to have effect (they cease to be rules at all), and any initial impact is lost to chaos.

Like the rules of poetry and architecture, the structures and traditions of the Church don't have to stifle, but can give shape, rhythm and beauty to life in all its heterodoxy.

When we enter into rituals such as kneeling together at Mass, thumbing rosary beads and singing hymns, we join body and soul with others in a way that intellectual debate cannot replicate. We experience ourselves not as solitary seekers but as part of something larger: the mystical Body of Christ. As Lewis said, as members of a single body, "we are members of one another."

To this great body each person brings unique charisms and talents - whether in music, prayer, reading, or running parish accounts - that together form a whole. In that wholeness, individuality is not erased but fulfilled.

The burden of individualism is lifted because we do not have to tackle the big questions on our own. When considering a community of faith,

Ross Douhat suggests thinking of it like starting out on a great pilgrimage that "generations of human beings have travelled before, looking around at the piled-up knapsacks and guidebooks that prior pilgrims have carried and used and written, and seeing what they might have to offer."

### **The Gift of Not Going Alone**

If the burden of modern life is the demand to invent meaning entirely on our own, perhaps the gift of the Church is that we don't have to. The maps and guidebooks of our forebears can show us the way to a relationship with God that is personal, but never private. Faith unfolds in silence and solitude, yes, but also in the communal action and imitation of others - and in the sight and encouragement of the saints.

Belief doesn't always come from within; sometimes we feel it through joyful osmosis from others doing the same thing, until it grows in our own lives in a new way. ♦

The cloister of Gloucester cathedral  
Photograph © Lena Feindt



# SACRED SEEING: WHEN LIGHT FINDS YOU

Light was the doorway; grace, the revelation. One woman's story of how mystical vision prepared her for faith.

by *Lena Feindt*

**I am not a morning person, but there is one thing that makes getting up a little easier: the sun's rays spilling through the kitchen window, filling the room—and me—with a hopeful energy for the day ahead.**

As a practising architect, I had always been keenly aware of the crucial role light plays in design—whether in private homes, public buildings or places of worship.

Yet it was not through my work, but through my fascination with the Middle Ages—a world of mystics, theologians, and master builders that gave rise to Europe's soaring, light-filled cathedrals—that I began to understand the spiritual significance of light in a Christian context.

## **Visions of Christian Mystics**

I had spent many months immersed in medieval

writings, both architectural and theological, when I encountered the extraordinary works of two female Christian mystics—German abbess Saint Hildegard von Bingen and the English anchoress Julian of Norwich.

Saint Hildegard, a 12th-century Benedictine abbess devoted to prayer and contemplation, experienced vivid mystical visions, which she described as having received “*in the spirit of the Living Light.*” She called God the Lux Vivens—the “*Living Light,*” the source of all revelation and vitality.

The human soul, she believed, shares in that same radiance: “*The soul is a living light, by which the body is illumined.*” Sin clouds that light; virtue restores its brilliance. Hildegard illustrated her visions in manuscripts rich with colour and geometric form, reflecting an

understanding of the cosmic order she had seen in her luminous experiences.

The writings of the fourteenth-century anchoress Julian of Norwich tell of the mystical visions she experienced after losing her husband and children to the Black Death and standing on the brink of death herself. She saw striking images of Christ's passion, gaining profound insight into divine love and the meaning of suffering. She describes how her room filled with brightness, symbolising God's self-disclosure: "Suddenly all my pain was taken from me, and I was whole... I saw light, most bright and fair, and I was filled with comfort." Her writings, preserved in *Revelations of Divine Love*, have since offered countless Christians deep consolation in times of sorrow and adversity.

Light, a powerful carrier of hope in the midst of struggle, was used intentionally in the design of medieval Christian churches. It is no coincidence that most Christian churches are oriented towards the east, the direction of the rising sun. Since the early centuries of the Church, this eastward alignment has carried deep symbolic meaning. The rising sun evokes the dawn of Christ's resurrection—His victory over darkness and death—and the expectation of His return. As morning light pours through the stained-glass windows onto the high altar, it becomes a transmitter of divine love and signals a hope for redemption. The radiance of sunlight streaming through a Gothic rose window embodies the union of heaven and earth—divine light passing through glass fashioned by human hands in reverence to God.

#### Moments of Transcendence

Julian of Norwich and Saint Hildegard were vessels of divine revelation, and their profound writings have brought solace and inspiration to generations of Christians over the centuries. Of course, most of us encounter far humbler glimpses of the divine — unexpected, unbidden moments when we are touched by God's light and grace — yet these moments are no less profound and moving.

One such moment happened to me in my early thirties, when I was fortunate enough to travel to Tanzania to fulfil a childhood dream of witnessing African wildlife with my own eyes. I was on the back of a safari truck as we drove through the



**"THE UNIVERSE," AN IMAGE CREATED FOR THE ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPT SCAVIAS BY SAINT HILDEGARD IN 12TH-CENTURY GERMANY. SAINT HILDEGARD, A BENEDICTINE ABBESS AND MYSTIC, WAS PROCLAIMED A DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH IN 2012.**

Ngorongoro Crater. The light was alive and pulsing; clouds and earth seemed to merge; the horizon had melted. Floating animals appeared like mythical beasts. I had never felt so alive, so joyful, so connected to life itself. In that instant, the crater became a cathedral celebrating the light of God's miraculous creation.

A subtler, yet no less moving, experience from my teenage years remains vivid in my memory. On a sunny morning, on a makeshift stage beneath a canopy of oak trees, we rehearsed Mozart's Fortieth Symphony with our school orchestra. Sunlight filtered through the leaves, dancing across the grass in a cosmic ballet that accompanied our music. Joy overcame me, and I was suddenly aware of the sheer miracle of being alive; in the interplay of music and light, I sensed a divine presence embracing us.

Though these beautiful, fleeting moments had long been buried beneath the bustle of daily life, they had always stayed with me in the back of my mind.

But it was only now, with the benefit of hindsight and since embracing the Christian faith, that I could recognise their significance: In those moments, God revealed Himself to me through light and beauty.

### The Dark Valley

Yet light and beauty were not always at my side. For most of my adult life, depression had been an unwelcome companion. I had tried every imaginable way to cope. Psychoanalysis initially proved helpful, as it unearthed the root causes, but it was a purely intellectualised approach that did not change how I felt in the here and now.

At the time, I had not awakened to the grace and healing power of prayer. I was searching for meaning but had not yet become a follower of Christ. Matters of the heart and mind were attended to with the same analytical mindset I applied to my work in architecture. That approach, however, was clearly not leading me anywhere; I had reached a dead end.

One day, while listening to a podcast, I heard a discussion about psilocybin—the active compound in magic mushrooms—and its potential benefits for treatment-resistant depression. Hitting another low point during a depressive episode, I decided to give it a try. After doing my due diligence—reassured that psilocybin retreats were legal in Holland and the sessions guided by trained psychologists—I booked a ticket to Amsterdam.

The experience began in confusion: waves of energy surged, kaleidoscopic shapes twisted and stacked, dark, insect-like forms flickering at the edges of vision like inkblots. Then the chaos eased, and somewhere in that relief a stillness opened—and light poured in—revealing that behind everything moved a greater order, luminous and alive. The trees outside seemed animated, radiating a quiet, harmonious energy. With my eyes closed, the visions shifted into delicate geometric forms, reminiscent of Gothic vaults, carved tracery, and stained-glass windows—a strange beauty that felt at once real and unreal. After the experience, I felt

*What if light  
is not merely  
a physical  
phenomenon,  
but a  
manifestation  
of divine  
love?*



more confusion than clarity though; it left me not enlightened, but searching. As an agnostic, I had no religious framework for what I had glimpsed; everything seemed random and disorienting.

### **The Slow Illumination**

In the months that followed, I decided to take the confusion as an invitation to engage more deeply with nature, art, and beauty—a process that required time and attention. My perception of reality had gently shifted, leaving me dissatisfied with my agnostic outlook - and making me curious, searching for spiritual meaning and context.

Ultimately, it was this path that led me to embrace the Christian faith. At last, I could name what I had been seeking all along: the light I had glimpsed in nature, art, architecture, and even in the disorienting experience in Holland was a reflection of God’s love. At the time, I did not know what I was looking for; I was depressed, unaware of the context of my suffering, and uncertain where to seek solace. Yet He had known me and seen me all along, speaking through nature, through light and even through the mushrooms. Now, at last, my heart was open to recognise the light and receive His grace.

The Church teaches that authentic mystical experience comes through prayer, the sacraments, and love. No substance can confer faith or replace grace. My psychedelic

experience may have been a detour, yet God, who witnessed my suffering, spoke to me and guided me back toward the greater light I would encounter fully in Christ.

### **The Light That Remains**

Light is not merely a physical phenomenon, but a manifestation of divine love. Light, in its movement, colour, and intensity, becomes a spiritual medium: a reminder that the Divine can be encountered through the ordinary as much as the extraordinary, guiding attention, heightening awareness and creating space for encounter with God.

Places of worship, as I now understand, are intentionally designed to choreograph divine light in space and evoke moments of transcendence. La Sainte-Chapelle, built by Louis IX as a grand repository for Jesus’s crown of thorns, is a powerful example. Kenneth Clarke described it as a “threshold into a higher world”: “When the light pours through the coloured glass (...) it sets up a kind of vibration in the air, an electric charge, it is, if you will, the artistic representation of the electric meeting of two spirits—the human and the divine. It is what a human heart elevated to and by God looks like—transfigured, luminous, radiantly beautiful.”

That, to me, is what grace feels like—filtered, refracted, sometimes dimmed by imperfection, but still unmistakably divine. ♦

The Ngorongoro Crater at dusk, 2011  
Photograph © Lena Feindt





*The King Died Naked on a Tree*

# THE CHURCH WAS BORN A BRIDE

.....  
*A deeper look at Catholicism reveals not just a male-led hierarchy, but a spiritual tradition that radically redefines power, centres the feminine, and offers a cruciform vision of authority unlike anything else in the modern world.*  
.....

by *Richard Wise*

**W**hen I rejoined the Catholic Church some 25 years ago, I wasn't thinking much about privilege. The phrase "white male entitlement" wasn't even in the air yet. I was simply hungry for a deeper truth about life and a desire to transcend myself. Still, over time, I began to notice something harder to ignore: the way women have so often been denied dignity and voice within the Church I loved.

The visual evidence is undeniable:

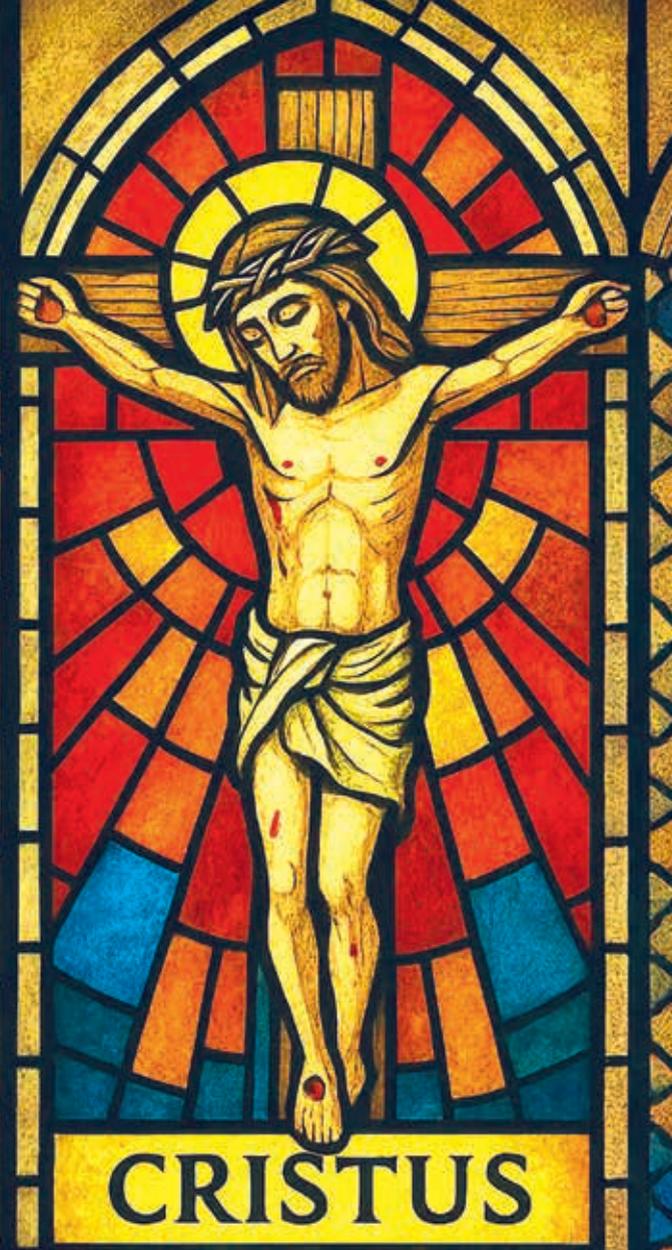
- ❖ a male priesthood,
- ❖ male-dominated leadership,
- ❖ centuries of teaching articulated almost exclusively by men,
- ❖ the exclusion of women from sacramental roles that has left real pastoral scars.

At first, this looked like proof of patriarchy carved in stone. But what surprised me most was how Catholicism began to unmake the implicit sense of entitlement I carried, forcing me to rethink what power actually means. What I found was not regression but subversion—sometimes even revolution.

**Yes, the Hierarchy Is Male.  
But That's not the Whole Story.**

In Catholic theology, the priest is not a boss climbing a corporate ladder. He is ordained to serve, to disappear into Christ, who laid aside power to wash feet and be crucified. Priesthood is not privilege; it is a form of martyrdom.

The upside-down logic of the Church says



the last are first, the hidden are greatest, and holiness trumps hierarchy every time.

#### **Mary, Not Peter, is the Model**

If you want to know the Church, don't look first at Peter. Look at Mary.

Tradition calls her the Mother of the Church, the perfect disciple, the icon of the Church itself—Ecclesia (the Greek word for Church). She is not ordained. She never preached a sermon. And yet she is the human being closest to God.

At first, when I returned to Catholicism, this Marian devotion unsettled me. It felt like a

goddess had been inserted into my religion. But over time, I absorbed the teaching that Mary was given as a spiritual mother to all of Christ's followers. I began to pray the Rosary and to contemplate her radical acceptance of suffering. Slowly, something shifted in me. I found I could bring my own anguish to her, and what emerged was what many men find in Marian devotion: a softening of my crabby hardness, a dilation of my empathy, and above all a sense of solidarity with other human beings—a release from snobbery and separateness.

Stranger still: the Church itself is called she.

Scripture and liturgy call the Church the Bride of Christ. Not an army. Not a corporation. A bride. The mystical body is feminine—not as a metaphor tacked on, but as its very identity.

### Women Have Always Shaped the Church

Even in a male-led institution, women’s voices have been among the strongest in its history.

St. Catherine of Siena commanded popes to return to Rome. St. Teresa of Ávila reformed monastic life and wrote mystical works that still stand among the Church’s greatest theology. Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker movement and unsettled every status quo she touched.

*Masculine and feminine are not rivals. They are partners in a divine romance.*

And these aren’t anomalies. In the communion of saints, greatness isn’t gendered. Holiness is. “Don’t call me a saint,” Dorothy Day once said. “I don’t want to be dismissed that easily.” Women shaped the Church not by permission, but by their holiness, courage and uncompromising fidelity.

### Not Patriarchy—Nuptial Mystery

So, what if Catholicism is not just a human power system, but a sacramental story—a paradox where worldly hierarchies are undone by divine love?

The Church sees creation through the lens of nuptial mystery—the dance of giving and receiving, of union that is fruitful and free. In this light, gender is not a fight for status but a symbol of deeper realities.

That can sound strange—even retrograde. But for me, it offered an alternative to the zero-sum logic of power. Masculine and feminine are not rivals. They are partners in a divine romance. And true authority is not about domination but laying down your life.

### Is That Enough?

None of this excuses the Church’s sins—from misogyny to clericalism to abuse of power. The critique of patriarchy must be heard, deeply.

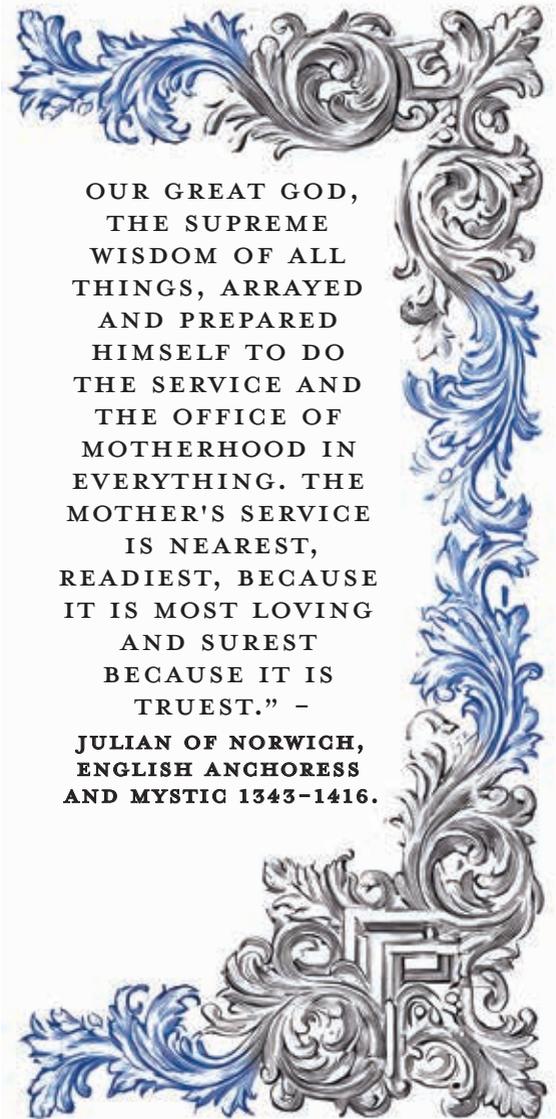
But Catholicism has also taught me to look deeper: to see a tradition that at its best subverts

power itself. It asks not who gets to speak, but who is willing to serve. Not who wears the robes, but who bears the cross.

So yes, Catholicism looks patriarchal. But beneath the surface, it tells a stranger story:

- ❖ A Queen of Heaven who was a teenage girl from provincial Nazareth.
- ❖ A King who died naked on a tree.
- ❖ A Church whose greatest title is Mother, whose greatest throne is the altar of sacrifice.

This story has steadily unravelled my unconscious entitlement, not by lecturing me, but by surprising me with a vision of authority I could never have imagined: cruciform, feminine, and free. ♦



OUR GREAT GOD,  
THE SUPREME  
WISDOM OF ALL  
THINGS, ARRAYED  
AND PREPARED  
HIMSELF TO DO  
THE SERVICE AND  
THE OFFICE OF  
MOTHERHOOD IN  
EVERYTHING. THE  
MOTHER'S SERVICE  
IS NEAREST,  
READIEST, BECAUSE  
IT IS MOST LOVING  
AND SUREST  
BECAUSE IT IS  
TRUEST.” -

**JULIAN OF NORWICH,  
ENGLISH ANCHORESS  
AND MYSTIC 1343-1416.**

## ROSEWATERS

Send for a cup of clear water;  
Taken from a Huron glade;  
Make the cup one of onyx;  
Passing through the slate and  
shade;  
Bring the cup in hands  
unblemished;  
The cupbearer bright of face;  
And let the fires of  
Hell diminish;  
Mary, thou art full of grace.

*By Gabriel Olearnik*

