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Radiance

LIGHT SHINING IN THE DARKNESS

IS GOD JUST IN OUR IMAGINATION?

SERIOUSLY, GOD CARES ABOUT ME?

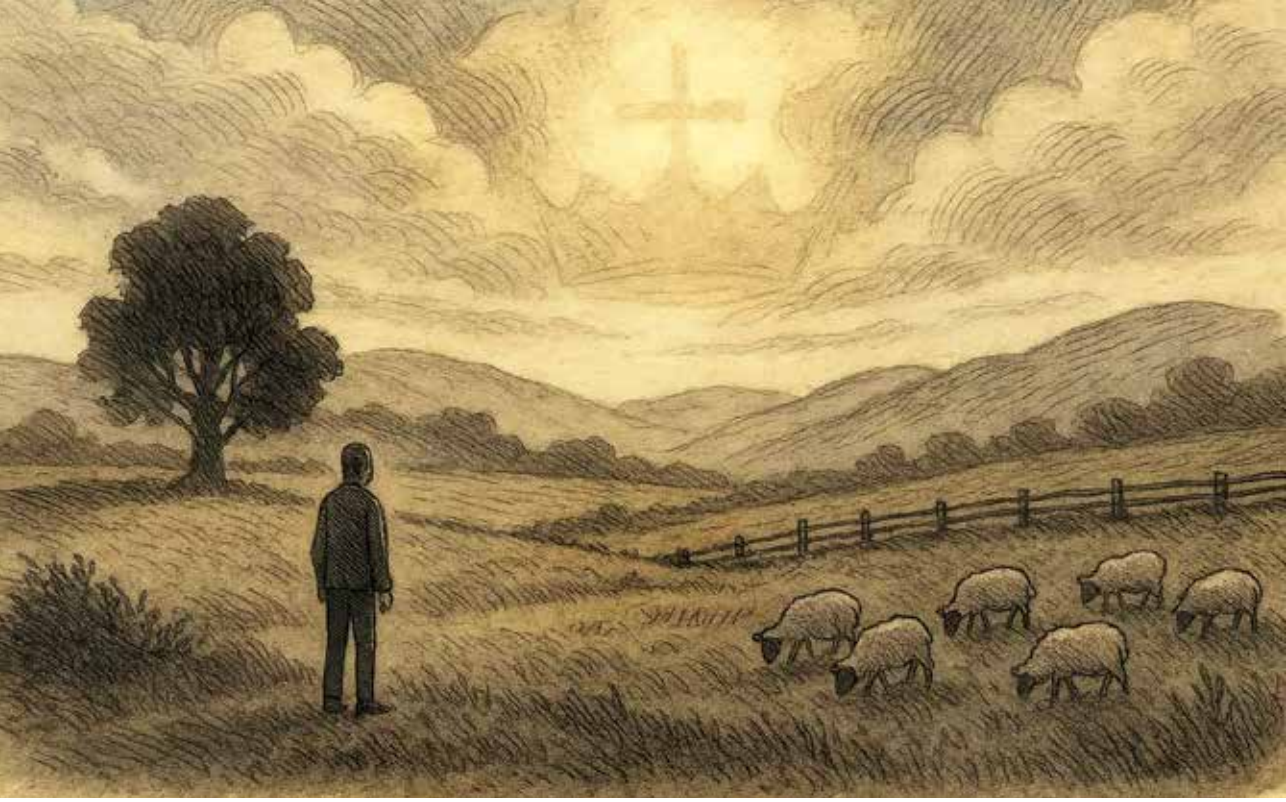
THE SUPERNATURAL: HOW TO FIND IT

PEOPLE PLEASING: END YOUR EXHAUSTION

THE CLIMATE CRISIS: A SPIRITUAL SOLUTION

THE ADDICT WHO BECAME A SAINT

VOL. 3, 2025



Here at *Radiance* we have always believed that truth surprises us—especially when it arrives disguised as weakness, paradox or joy. In this issue, each writer offers not a neat answer, but a bracing invitation to see things anew. We've always loved the title of Gerard Hughes's spiritual classic: *God of Surprises*.

We begin with the story of an opium addict turned saint. Then, Luke Taylor lets theology speak with surprises to modern doubt. Tom W. McGrath wonders why God might be personally interested in each of us and finds the answer in tenderness. Lena Feindt uncovers the lost harmony between geometry, art and divine order. James Austen invites us to take Scripture personally—awkwardness and all. Leo McGrath shows why the longing for magic might be closer to sanctity than we thought. Jo-Ann Pereira proposes a 90-day dare you didn't see coming. Marie Moore helps people pleasers stop contorting themselves—and start healing. Maria Carvalho discovers climate grief is a call to prayer, not panic. And finally, Benedictine monk Christopher Jamison walks through museums and finds holy ground in history, protest and art.

Wherever you are in life—certain, searching or sceptical—this issue invites you to pause, look twice and listen for the quiet knock of the unexpected.

— Richard Wise

RADIANCE
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The Story of Saint Mark Ji Tianxiang

THE ADDICT WHO BECAME A SAINT

A devout Catholic and physician battled a lifelong addiction to opium yet remained unwavering in his faith. His journey from struggle to sainthood offers hope for anyone seeking God's grace amidst personal trials and repeated failures.

by ***Richard Wise***

In the annals of Catholic saints, few stories resonate as profoundly with those battling addiction as that of Saint Mark Ji Tianxiang.

A 19th-century Chinese physician, husband, father, and devout Catholic, Mark's life was a testament to unwavering faith amidst personal struggle, societal misunderstanding, and relentless persecution. His journey from addiction to sainthood offers a beacon of hope for all who grapple with the chains of dependency.

A Respected Physician's Descent into Addiction

Born in 1834 in the Jizhou District of Hengshui, Hebei, China, Mark Ji Tianxiang (pronounced Tee-en-shee-ong) was raised in a Christian family during a period when Christianity was often met with suspicion in Chinese society. He became a well-respected physician, known for his compassionate care and dedication to treating the poor without charge.

In his mid-thirties, Mark developed a severe stomach ailment. In an era devoid of advanced medical treatments, he turned to opium—a common remedy at the time—to alleviate his pain. Unfortunately, what began as a medicinal use led to a debilitating addiction. Despite his medical knowledge and deep faith, Mark found himself ensnared by the very substance he had prescribed to others.

A Devout Catholic Denied the Sacraments

Mark's addiction became a source of deep personal shame and spiritual conflict. As a devout Catholic, he sought reconciliation through

the sacrament of confession, repeatedly confessing his opium use. However, his confessor, interpreting his repeated relapses as a lack of genuine contrition and firm purpose of amendment, began to withhold absolution. This decision was influenced by the limited understanding of addiction in the 19th century, which often viewed such dependencies purely as moral failings rather than complex medical and psychological conditions.

For the last thirty years of his life, Mark was denied the Eucharist—the spiritual sustenance central to his faith. Despite this exclusion, he remained steadfast in his devotion. He continued to attend Mass regularly, prayed fervently, and upheld his commitment to serving others, embodying a profound spiritual resilience.

Martyrdom During the Boxer Rebellion

The dawn of the 20th century brought the Boxer Rebellion, a violent anti-foreign and anti-Christian uprising in China. In 1900, Mark, along with his family, was arrested for his faith. Offered the chance to renounce Christianity to save his life, he refused. Demonstrating profound courage and paternal care, he requested to be executed last, ensuring he could provide comfort to each of his family members as they faced martyrdom. As he awaited his own death, he sang the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a testament to his unwavering faith even in the face of imminent death.

Recognising a Saint for the Addicted

Mark Ji Tianxiang's path to sainthood culminated in his canonisation on October 1, 2000, by Pope John Paul II, alongside 119 other Chinese martyrs. This recognition was not only a testament to his martyrdom but also an acknowledgement of his unwavering faith amidst personal trials.

The canonisation process in the Catholic Church involves several stages, including the verification of miracles attributed to the individual's intercession. However, in the case of martyrs like Mark, the requirement for miracles can be waived, as their ultimate sacrifice is considered a profound witness to their faith.

Saint Mark Ji Tianxiang's story holds particular resonance for individuals battling various forms of addiction—be it alcohol, drugs, sex, or other compulsions.

Prayer to Saint Mark Ji Tianxiang

O merciful Saint Mark Ji Tianxiang,

You who bore the heavy cross of addiction and yet remained steadfast in your faith,

We come before you, burdened by our own struggles and failures.

Intercede for us, dear saint, that in our moments of weakness and relapse,

We may never lose sight of God's infinite love and mercy.

Help us to trust that even in our sin and dependence,

Our Heavenly Father holds us close, desiring our healing and wholeness.

Pray for us, that we may find the courage to rise again,

To persevere in faith, and to grow stronger in our relationship with God each day.

Guide us toward humility, hope, and the grace to surrender ourselves entirely to His will.

Through your example of unwavering devotion amidst great trial,

Teach us to embrace the journey of redemption,

Knowing that God's grace is sufficient, and His love never fails.

Saint Mark Ji Tianxiang, patron of the addicted and the broken-hearted,

Pray for us, and lead us ever closer to the heart of Christ.

Amen.

Modern understanding recognises addiction as a complex interplay of physical, psychological, and spiritual factors. Mark's experience underscores the importance of compassion and support for those struggling with dependency. His unwavering commitment to his faith, even when denied the sacraments, illustrates that spiritual growth and divine grace can operate outside conventional frameworks.

For creative people and professionals, who navigate the pressures of innovation and expression, leading to vulnerabilities to various addictions, Saint Mark's life serves as a poignant reminder. It emphasises that personal struggles do not preclude one from achieving greatness in virtue and that the journey toward recovery and holiness is marked by perseverance, humility, and an unyielding trust in God's mercy.

A Beacon of Hope

Saint Mark Ji Tianxiang's legacy is a powerful testament to the triumph of faith over personal and societal obstacles. His life encourages us to approach those battling addiction with empathy and to recognise that the path to holiness is often fraught with struggles. In honouring his memory, we find inspiration to persist in our own journeys, trusting that, like Saint Mark, we too can find redemption and sanctity amidst life's challenges.

Religious persecution has a long history in China, especially persecution of Christians, thousands of whom have died for their faith in the last millennium.

120 Martyrs of China

On October 1, 2000, Pope John Paul II canonised 120 men, women, and children who gave their lives for the faith in China between the years 1648 and 1930. The martyrs include 87 native Chinese and 33 foreign missionaries. The majority were killed during the Boxer Rebellion of 1900.

"Chinese men and women of every age and state, priests, religious and lay people, showed the same conviction and joy, sealing their unfailing fidelity to Christ and the Church with the gift of their lives," said the Holy Father during the canonisation.

"Resplendent in this host of martyrs are also the 33 missionaries who left their land and sought to immerse themselves in the Chinese world, lovingly assimilating its features in the desire to proclaim Christ and to serve those people."

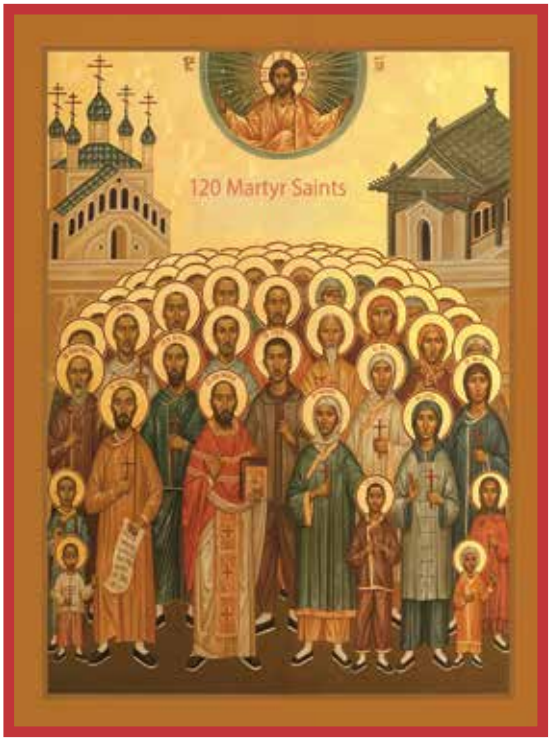
"The Door of Heaven is Open to All."

Of the 33 foreign-born missionaries, most were priests and religious, including members of the Order of Preachers, Friars Minor, Jesuits, Salesians and Franciscan Missionaries of Mary.

One of the more well-known native martyrs was a 14-year-old Chinese girl named Ann Wang, who was killed during the Boxer Rebellion when she refused to renounce her faith.

Wang bravely withstood the threats of her torturers, and just as she was about to be beheaded, she radiantly declared, "The door of heaven is open to all" and repeated the name of Jesus three times.

Another of the martyrs was 18-year-old Chi Zhuzi, who had been preparing to receive the sacrament of Baptism when he was caught on the road one night and ordered to worship idols. He refused to do so, revealing his belief in Christ. His right arm was cut off and he was tortured, but he would not deny his faith. Rather, he fearlessly pronounced to his captors, before being flayed alive, "Every piece of my flesh, every drop of my blood will tell you that I am Christian." ◆



"The Bearded Old Man in the Sky"

IS GOD JUST A CONSTRUCT OF OUR IMAGINATION?

One Jesuit's journey through doubt, art and analogy in search of the real God.

by ***Luke Taylor, SJ***

Standing in the baptismal pool of an ancient cave church in the centre of Turkey, I looked up at a fresco of God the Father painted onto the dome. The painting was faded but the face was still visible: a long white beard, aquiline nose, hooded eyes. Then, when I called out to my friend outside the cave, the strangest thing happened. The carefully carved acoustic dome bounced my voice back down to me and I heard my own voice as the voice of God.

That experience haunted me. Was that echo just an architectural trick? Or was it a parable? Is the voice of God really only a ventriloquist echo? Are our images of God in fact projections of our own human experience? Can modern people still believe in a God who isn't just a comforting construct?

Years later, studying modern philosophy as a Jesuit in Paris, my suspicions deepened. Before the Enlightenment, it might have been possible to believe in God as an Old Man in the Sky. But now, thinkers like Immanuel Kant showed how our consciousness is bounded by space and time. God, if He exists, seems inaccessible. For Freud, God was the projection of a disciplinarian father; for Marx, a celestial landlord; for Nietzsche, a fiction to be eradicated.

I wasn't ready to pronounce God's death. But I was troubled. The Bible is stuffed with anthropomorphic images: God as jealous Husband, careful Shepherd, fierce Warrior. How could these be more than ancient poetry? In museums, I wandered past paintings of the Trinity: an Old Man, a Young Man, a Bird. Surely this wasn't the whole picture. I needed a key to bridge human image and divine mystery.

The God Beyond Language

That key came, unexpectedly, in theology. It turned out the whole tradition was already wrestling with my problem. From biblical writers to mystics and bishops, the Church had an answer: analogia entis — the analogy of being.

Reassuringly, the tradition agreed with the atheists: if God is real, He must be utterly unlike anything we can imagine. God is not an object, not an old man, not a cosmic CEO. He has no body, no parts. As the Church Fathers insisted: God is not in the sky, or on land, or anywhere at all in the way creatures are. God told Moses simply: I Am (Exodus 3:14).

But this created a new problem. Could we say anything about a God so radically other?

The God Who Speaks in Images

Here the tradition made a bold reversal. Having stripped away all false likeness, it affirmed: everything in creation bears some likeness to God. Not because God is like a shepherd or a cedar tree, but because relationships within creation echo the relationship between God and His people.

The Fourth Lateran Council and Thomas Aquinas offered clarity: our speech about God isn't literal, but analogical. It's not metaphor ("my love is like a rose"). It's analogy: A is to B as C is to D. A shepherd cares for sheep as God cares for us. A jealous husband longs for his wife as God longs for His people. These are not projections upward, but reflections downward from divine truth into earthly echoes.

Orthodoxy silenced the mythological God. It ushered us into worshipful stillness before a Mystery beyond image, beyond imagination.

The God Who Writes in Creatures

This vision doesn't dissolve the world into signs. It honours the world as real. The shepherd and sheep are not God and Church. They are themselves. And it is precisely by being fully themselves that they hint at something more.

This analogical vision calls forth my own creativity. Scripture offers some revealed analogies, but I'm invited to discover my own: the hover of a kestrel as God's wings; the mist on my face as the Spirit's breath. God's face was painted in that Cappadocian cave. But I see His face now in those I love. And in a starfish, too.

An Invitation to the Reader

What images have stayed with you this week? What moment, however small, cracked open a glimpse of something eternal?

God is not a construct of your imagination. But your imagination, tuned by love and humility, might just become a window into God. ◆

ANALOGIA ENTIS

The Ancient Wisdom Behind a Relationship with the Divine

WHY WOULD GOD BE INTERESTED IN ME?

How prayer, even when it doesn't "fix" our lives, realigns us with divine care and a more fitting perspective on our situation.

by ***Tom W. McGrath***

Ever felt like you're giving everything, and still losing yourself? You're doing your best—meeting deadlines, commuting, maintaining relationships, trying to make ends meet—and it still doesn't feel like enough. You have so little opportunity to live your life. There's a moment in *The Bourne Identity* when a dying assassin says, "Look at what they make you give," which sums this feeling up well.

But what if you didn't have to face this weariness alone? For Catholics, and for the Catholic-curious, there's a profound answer that tradition offers: you're not unseen. In fact, you're intimately known. Living a spiritual life isn't only about doctrine or Sunday rituals—it's about cultivating a personal relationship with the divine. One that speaks directly to our overworked, overstimulated, overburdened selves.

The Christian claim isn't just that God exists. It's that God became human to know you, love you and redeem you as you are. Not as a concept or category, but as a person. You are "called by name" (Isaiah 43:1); every hair on your head is counted (Luke 12:7).

But God does not merely know about us, like a celestial observer. He is much more active than that, holding every aspect of all people—body, mind, soul—in existence at any moment. Our being depends always and wholly on His will and freely-given creative act. Our existence is a consequence of God's care.

But What About When Life Feels... Awful?

Let's say you've prepped for a big presentation. You've prayed about it. But then your laptop crashes, or someone asks the one question you

hadn't prepared for. Where was God in that moment? Does this make a mockery of prayer, and (by association) the idea of praying to develop a personal relationship with the divine?

It's easy to feel like prayer failed—or worse, that God wasn't paying attention. But Catholic tradition offers a subtler view: prayer isn't necessarily about controlling outcomes as if it were a transaction in a providential supermarket. As Proverbs reminds us:

"Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established." (Proverbs 19:21)

Prayer is about reaching, for a moment, beyond this vale of tears (lacrimarum vallis) to transform the individual who prays rather than necessarily the world they inhabit. It does so by aligning their heart with God's will and helping them gain or regain a more fitting perspective on worldly demands—putting these in their rightful place.

Through prayer, then, we root ourselves in something greater: the assurance that even this mess, this chaos, is not outside God's loving presence.

Prayer isn't spiritual wishful thinking. It's a radical act of reorientation.

Reframing our Identity

Praying might not mean you avoid the tough meeting, the long commute, the drained bank account—but it might lead to feeling less rattled by these things, and more centred. It reframes one's identity—not as what you achieve, but as who you are in God's eyes.

To paraphrase Thomas in T.S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral, we can't "turn the wheel on which we turn." But we can let prayer shift how we see the turning—for instance, transforming worry about everyday problems with gratitude for the gift of existence, with hope for the future and with humility in one's self-understanding.

As Paul wrote to the Philippians:

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6–7)

Even Small Prayers Matter

On the train ride at the end of a soul-draining day, when the thought "look at what they make you give," or similar, crosses your mind, what if you said a prayer? Not to magically fix things, but to anchor yourself in the care of a God who actually notices how tired you are, and for whom no matter is too small, no worry too trivial.

Prayer won't always change your circumstances, but it might change you. It might create the space for peace. Perhaps then, to paraphrase Psalm 84:6, as you pass through the valley of tears, you might make it a place of springs. ◆

Jesus said:
"Do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' [...] your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."
(Matthew 6:31–33)

My Journey from Atheism to Faith

REDISCOVERING THE GEOMETRY OF THE SACRED

When grief shattered her carefully constructed world, architect Lena Feindt found herself walking an ancient pilgrimage path, sketching sacred spaces, and rediscovering a silent language of beauty and meaning. In this deeply personal journey, she shares how the timeless geometry of Gothic cathedrals led her from atheism to faith.

by ***Lena Feindt***

As I stood under the octagonal lantern of Ely Cathedral, I marvelled at the beauty of this sublime, light-flooded space. Far beyond mere stone, mortar, and oak, it emanated a sacred energy. Who were its medieval creators, and what force had guided their hands? As I followed the rays of light across the space, a wave of emotion swept over me, and I was moved to pray. As someone who had turned my back on faith as a teenager, I had come a long way.

I was your typical atheist—a latte-sipping urban professional, the kind who cheered for Christopher Hitchens as he dismantled Christian scholars in debate. I was so smug in my certainty that I had it all figured out, I dismissed the idea of God as a fairytale about a bearded man in the sky.

My journey to faith began in 2017 when my happy, carefree life suddenly fell to pieces. I had established a comfortable life in a small but cosy London apartment with my handsome musician boyfriend. Life had been good to us. The only thing missing was the sound of little footsteps in our home. However, after years of trying, I had to face the harsh reality that I was unable to have children. I was devastated. In pain, I turned to my partner for support, but instead of consoling me, he walked away. I fell into a deep, dark abyss of intense sorrow and grief. Seeking relief, I turned to therapy, but nothing eased the pain. For years,

my body and soul were numb, and even the smallest trigger would tear down my protective shield, revealing the broken woman I was on the inside. I was never going to have children. I was never going to have grandchildren. My future had died.

Unable to sit still and face the pain, I threw myself into physical work—redecorating my flat, digging up the garden and exercising. Every opportunity to move was an attempt to physically shake off the weight of my trauma and sorrow. When a friend told me about the Camino Santiago, the ancient pilgrimage route across Spain, I was intrigued. She described it as a journey filled with adventure and serendipitous encounters with strangers—and, most importantly, it involved walking 25 km every day. That was exactly the kind of distraction I needed.

And so, I packed my rucksack and my sketchbook, and off I went.

The Pilgrimage: A Step Towards Healing

The life of a pilgrim is simple: food, shelter and a sturdy pair of boots are all you need. The rhythm of your own feet on the gravel becomes a meditative drumbeat: walk, eat, sleep, repeat. I started recording events and encounters in my sketchbook.

Along the way, I found sanctuary in the quietude and coolness of churches. Even the smallest villages had beautiful chapels with soaring vaults, splendid, gilded altars, and exquisite effigies of the Virgin. Their walls, saturated with centuries of prayer, tears, and joy, seemed to hum with reverence. Their beauty, harmony and silence felt like a warm embrace from the heavens. Without intending to, I started praying. And at that moment, I knew I was not an atheist after all.

While the pilgrimage didn't 'fix' me, it grounded and humbled me, making my suffering feel shared rather than solitary. The fellowship and communion with pilgrims and clerics along the way offered both consolation and context.

I had left London as an atheist and had returned as an agnostic. This was my first stepping stone.

A New Perspective on Architecture

The ripple effect of my pilgrimage extended beyond my personal life into my work.

As a practising architect, I had spent the last decade designing ever-taller residential blocks for developers, driven by efficiency and profit.

This focus on the expedient and the material had left me increasingly disillusioned. Where was the human scale, and where was beauty?

As a remedy, I turned my attention to the past and enrolled in a master's degree in historic building conservation at Kingston University, hoping to rediscover beauty and meaning in the heritage gifted to us by our forefathers.

During my studies, my thoughts often returned to my pilgrimage and the beautiful churches I had visited along the way. Why had they resonated with me so deeply? What was it, exactly, that made them sacred? And why had we stopped creating them?

Geometry and the Divine

These questions eventually led me to explore the geometry of Gothic churches. Through courses and self-study, I learned to construct complex geometric patterns using only a compass, straightedge and pencil.

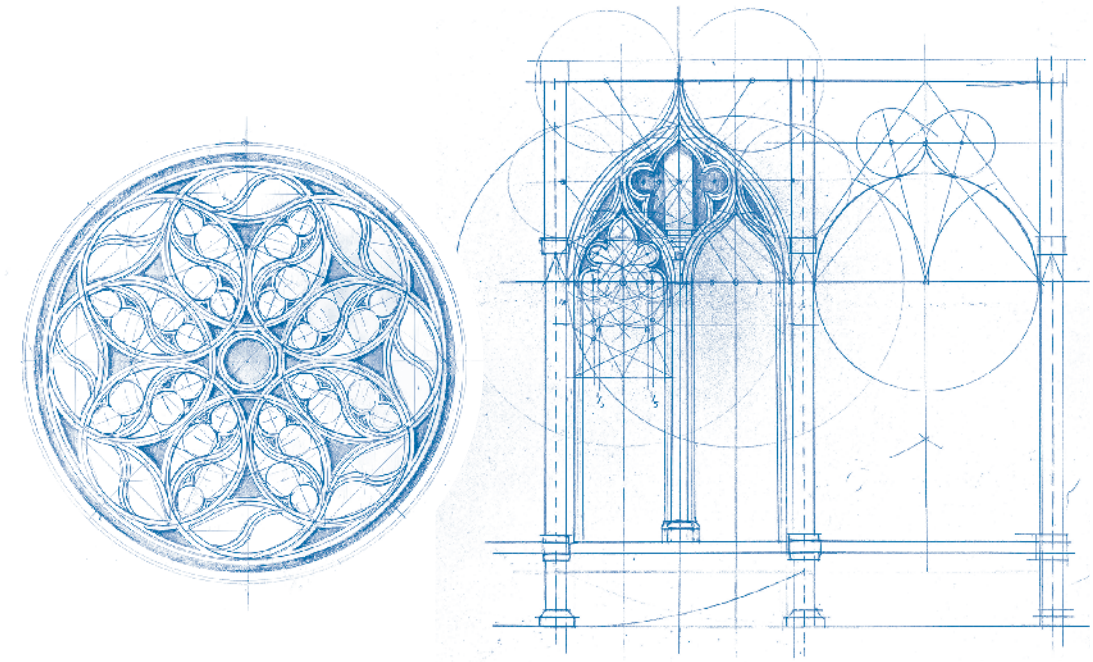
I began to understand the practice of geometry as applied philosophy. Geometry was not merely a practical tool for designing and constructing, but also a contemplative art form, used by medieval theologians and philosophers to explore religious ideas and convey symbolic meaning. It reflected the Divine order, bridging the cosmic and the earthly.

In nature, the universal order and harmony woven into creation are echoed everywhere—from the fractal patterns of snowflakes to the golden ratio in the human body, from the five-fold pattern of Venus and Earth as they dance around the Sun to the Fibonacci sequence in sunflowers—all grounded in the immutable laws of mathematics.

In sacred architecture, those same ratios and patterns convey spiritual meaning. The square symbolises the Earth, the material world, and the four elements. The triangle represents human consciousness, the Holy Trinity, and the ascent of the soul. The circle signifies unity, the wholeness of creation, the Heavens, and the Divine. Numbers also hold profound significance in Christian symbolism. The number five, for example, represents the Virgin Mary as the Mystical Rose and Morning Star, a sacred pattern often found in Lady Chapels.

My pilgrimage was a physical journey that sparked a spiritual experience, yet most spiritual experiences do not rely on external factors; we all encounter them when we pray, dream or feel love. As we close our eyes and slip into the subconscious just before falling asleep, we travel through space and time, geometric patterns dancing before us, hinting that the geometric shapes used in sacred spaces and observed in nature are not only manifesting externally, but are also within us—a part of us, as we are a part of them. When we pay attention, we begin to grasp the perspective of our medieval predecessors, who viewed geometry as the fundamental law governing the cosmos and as a tool to evoke a recollection of the eternal ideas of the soul. It is no surprise, then, that medieval master builders tapped into this ancient wisdom when manifesting the divine in stone and mortar.

Ilustrations by Lena Feindt



Barcelona Cathedral, Rose Window and Ely Cathedral, Lady Chapel alcoves, geometric study by Lena Feindt.

Learning geometric construction gave me important insights: every composition is developed through a series of iterative steps. Each step builds on the previous one, generating new intersections and creating a palimpsest of construction lines that form an invisible web beneath the final visible design.

This unfolding of geometry can be described as man's attempt to mimic the mathematical laws of nature. It explains why we perceive geometric designs as harmonious and beautiful and why they resonate with us so universally. Geometry is beautiful because it is true.

A Spiritual Awakening

I could now see that the designs of Gothic cathedrals were far from arbitrary; they were masterful compositions—harmonious reconciliations of the heavenly on earth, created by clerics and master builders initiated into the sacred art of geometry.

The more I studied, the more I began to see order and beauty woven into the very fabric of creation. I could no longer accept the materialist view that life had spontaneously sprung from nothingness and had arranged itself in such a beautiful, orderly fashion by pure chance, nor that consciousness was merely an accidental by-product of blind chance and purposeless natural processes.

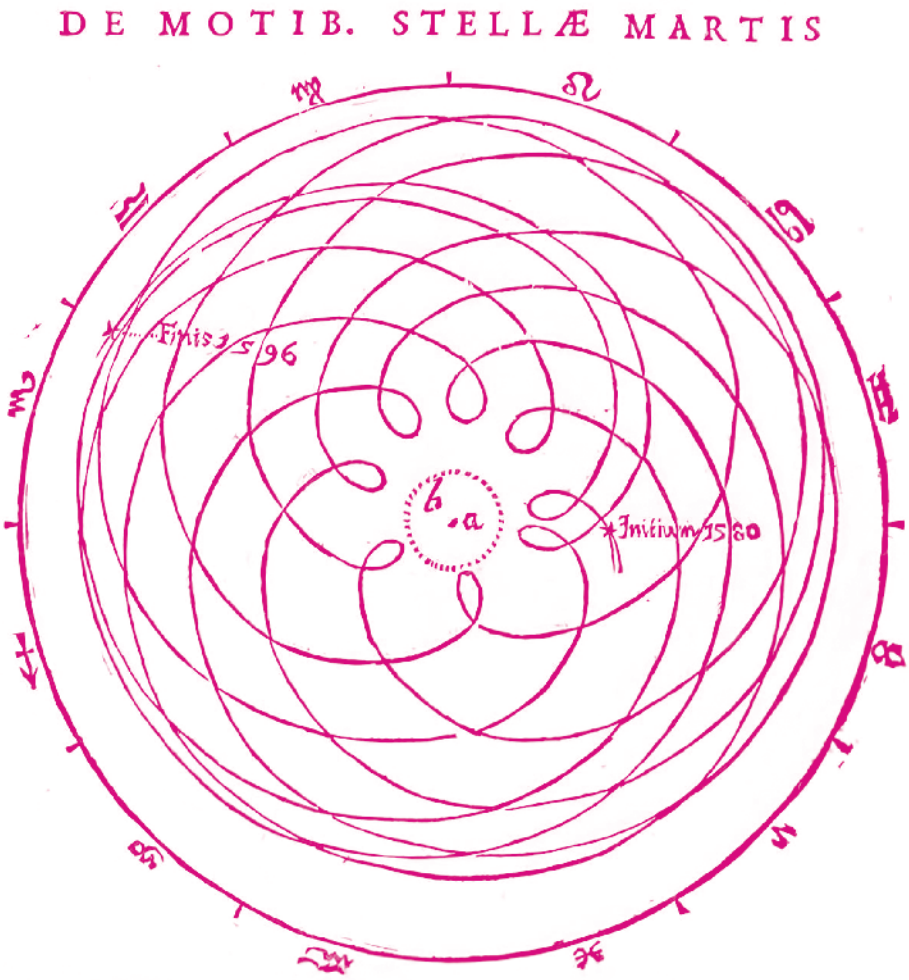
I knew then that life had been created. For the first time in my life, I believed. And I knew that God was real.

An Invitation to Rediscover the Sacred

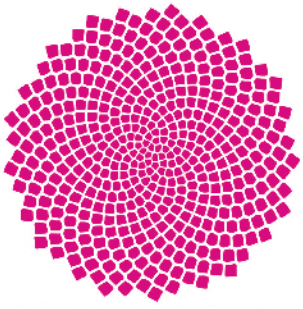
So, my journey to faith did not follow the path of scripture or sermon but came about through trauma and healing. Trauma had shaken up my smug, carefree existence, and geometry had offered consolation and healing. It taught me that truth, beauty, and goodness are inseparable and that order is divine and eternal. Most importantly, it opened my heart to prayer and offered me hope for the future.

As I continue to explore these connections through study, drawing and prayer, I hope to restore a sense of the sacred into my work as an artist and architect. As the late master geometer Keith Critchlow aptly said, “Any principles that help rediscover the intrinsic nature of sacredness are bound to be of value to mankind and totally relevant at any time."

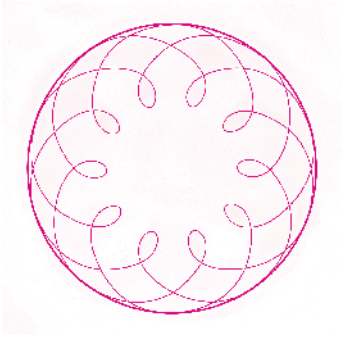
In embracing this principle, I hope we can restore much-needed beauty, harmony and hope into our modern world. ◆



"On the Motions of the Star Mars"—the complex orbital path of Mars as observed and calculated by Johannes Kepler (1609).



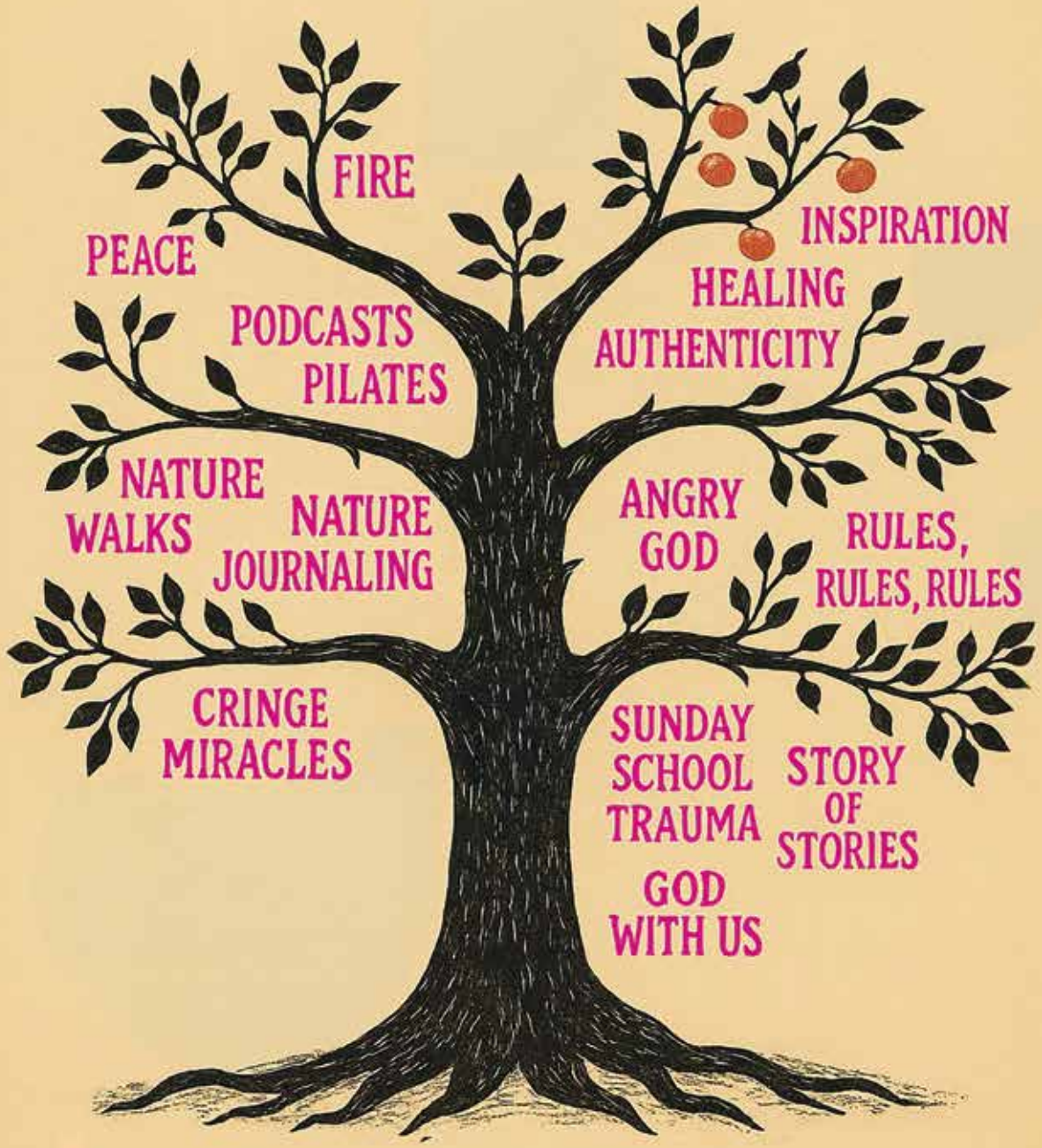
Sunflower seeds —which follow the Fibonacci sequence.



Epicyclic geocentric path of Juno, by Richard Proctor.

"The Dance of Venus" pattern of Venus seen over an 8-year cycle.

STORY OF STORIES



IRRELEVANT INTIMIDATING OUTDATED
JUDGMENTAL BORING

I'll Do Anything...

JUST DON'T MAKE ME READ THE BIBLE

You think you know what's in the Bible—long-winded, dry and about as life-changing as a bad self-help book—but what if reading it was more like an existential slap to the face? If you've ever wondered whether Jesus was a fraud, a madman or something far more dangerous, you owe yourself at least 50 pages to find out.

by ***James Austen***

The Complete Works of Shakespeare. War and Peace. The Bible. The great showpieces of the bookshelf. We all tell ourselves we'll get around to reading them one day. But there are always more exciting things to do, like scrolling TikTok, rearranging furniture, having an existential crisis.

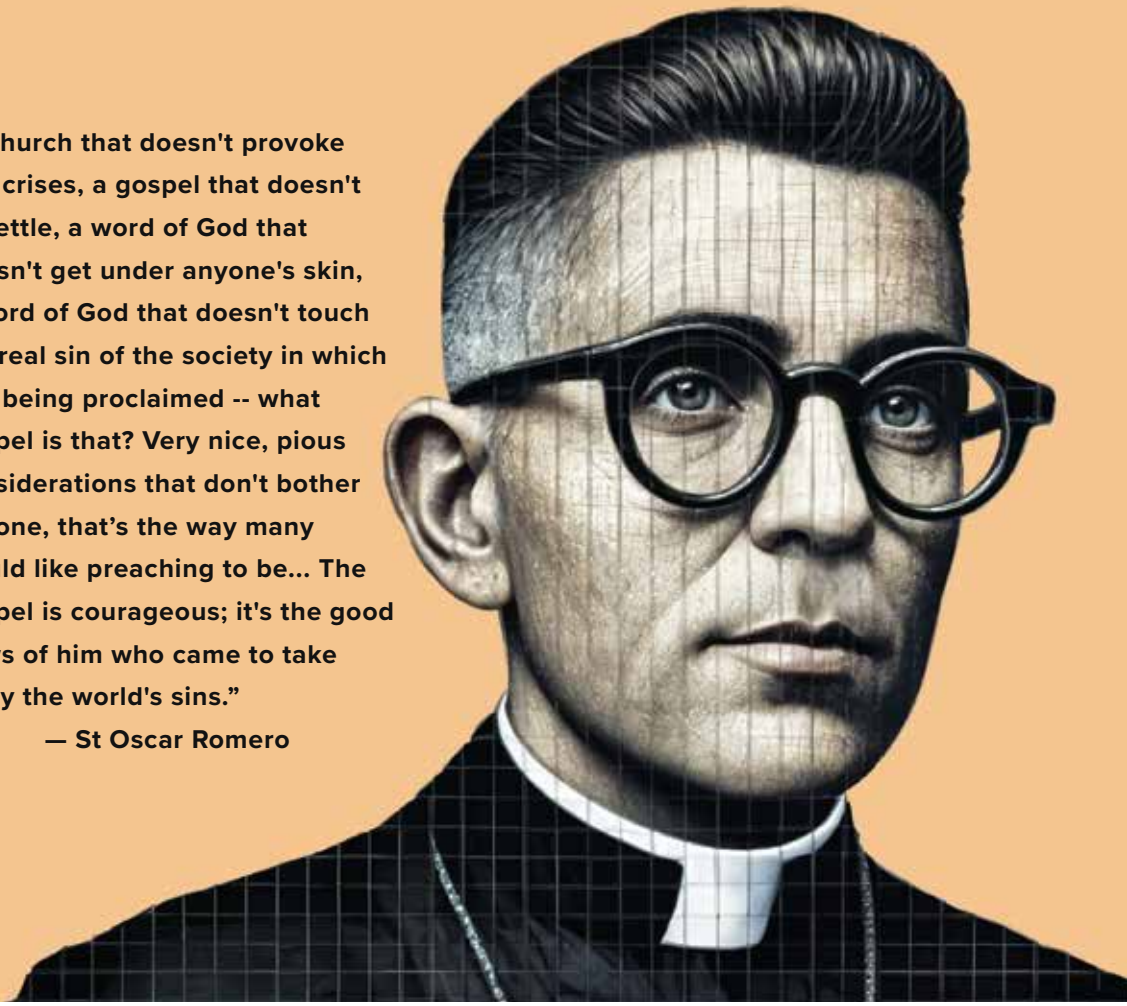
Most of us think that we know what's in the Bible, at least in theory. It's long. The pages are impossibly thin. The font oppressively small. And it boasts electrifying thrills that can only be had from never-ending genealogies. We all know that it has something to say about Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, and Moses, and that we meet Jesus Christ somewhere around page 1000 (before he goes and gets himself crucified a few pages later).

It's hardly screaming out to be read, unlike today's high-street self-help bestsellers: Atomic Habits (Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results!), What's Your Dream? (Find Your Passion, Love Your Work, Build a Richer Life), or Make Change That Lasts! (Nine Steps to Personal Freedom). Nowhere on the Bible's cover does it promise to transform your life in a few easy steps.

But transform your life it does. Not gradually, like a mindfulness routine, but rather like an ice bucket to the face. Reading the Gospels—really reading them—is like an alarm clock blaring at 5 AM on a freezing January morning. A punch you

“A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed -- what gospel is that? Very nice, pious considerations that don't bother anyone, that’s the way many would like preaching to be... The gospel is courageous; it's the good news of him who came to take away the world's sins.”

— St Oscar Romero



never saw coming. And Christians, with their optimistic sense of humour, call this “the good news.”

If you like the soft life, stick to Atomic Habits.

The New Testament—and most notably, the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—confronts us with a krisis (a Greek word meaning a moment of decisive judgement). Is the world truly as we perceive it? Within these pages, we encounter the person of Jesus Christ: a name known across the world, a figure about whom nearly everyone holds an impression—if not a firm conviction. Yet only through reading Scripture directly can we form a judgment of our own.

Few dispute that Jesus of Nazareth was born, lived, and died two millennia ago. That much is history. But in the sixteenth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus turns to his disciple Peter and asks: “Who do you say that I am?” In reading the New Testament, we too are faced with this same question. It may well be the most important question of your life—it may well cost you your life. This question is the crux of the krisis. Are you willing to confront it? To declare who you understand Jesus Christ to be, today?

Perhaps Jesus was simply a wise rabbi, a forthright teacher in the Jewish prophetic tradition; the resurrection a hallucination, a folie à deux among disappointed disciples. But if that’s the case, we have a problem: by itself, Jesus’s wisdom isn’t exactly the sort of thing that screams practical life advice. He doesn’t tell us how to be successful, admired or even safe. Instead, he calls his followers to divest from all other worldly powers, give themselves away to him entirely and embrace a path that ends in brutal execution. A winning self-help strategy it is not.

What of his claims to being the Son of God? What if instead he was just a little too human—a

narcissist with a God complex? We can try to leave these claims aside, but if we do, the entire text collapses.

Of course, the claims of divinity could have been added in later as part of a political ploy. A power play by a sect of Jewish radicals, a ruse designed to upend Rome and the religious establishment. But if that's the case, it's surely the worst-planned conspiracy in history, given that most of its earliest members ended up tortured, exiled or executed.

If Jesus wasn't who he claimed to be, then what we're left with isn't moral integrity—it's a lie.

Christians are aware of these possibilities. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St Paul muses that "if our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we are the most unfortunate of all people."

Alternatively, it could all be true.

I'll never forget the first time I properly read the Gospel of Matthew as a non-believer. Not skimmed, not cherry-picked, but actually read it. I'd waded through plenty of philosophy before, but this was different. This wasn't an argument or a theory—I knew that I was experiencing truth itself, shining through the page, smashing my preconceptions to pieces.

That's the thing about scripture: you can try, but you can't really read it like a book. Normally, we're the ones doing the reading: we analyse, we interpret, we judge. But with the Gospels, the roles are reversed. Here, we are the ones being read, deconstructed, reformed.

To read the Gospels is to be confronted by a light that illuminates everything—especially the things we'd rather not see. Our wounds, our shame, our selfishness, all thrown into sharp relief. And yet, at the same time, that light reveals something even more astonishing: that we are seen, known, loved, and forgiven by a love far greater than we can imagine. As this light shines through the gaps within us, our lives are permeated with a newfound sense of joy.

We see that Jesus has come to inaugurate a kingdom inconceivably different from earthly kingdoms. If Jesus is who he claims to be, then everything changes. The powers that we once based our life upon—money, prestige, security—turn out to be useless in the grand scheme of things. His death and resurrection bring us the salvation that we, as humans, naturally long for. Death itself is no longer an end but simply a threshold. This is the gospel—the Good News. Consequently, life can be lived in the day; each day is experienced as a gift to be shared with others.

Those who have encountered this light can't go back to their old lives—not really. They can try, of course, but truth has an irritating way of following you around. It forces you to take a stand eventually.

Any decision with serious consequences deserves to be given due attention. This is one of them. Wikipedia summaries won't suffice. So, what do you need? A proper Bible: the English Standard Version is modern, readable, and accurate. You can download it as a free app if you wish. A commentary can be useful (the Navarre Bible is particularly good), but don't get bogged down in study guides just yet. And before you panic, no, you don't need to read 1,000 pages. For now, 50 will do.

The Bible isn't a single book but a collection of them, and everything in it is read in the light of one person: Jesus Christ. So that's where to start. I suggest that you read only the Gospel of St Matthew and the Gospel of St John to begin with. Combined, that's about 50 pages.

If you still have an airtight excuse not to read 50 pages, we'd love to hear it—seriously, contact us at radiancemagazine.co.uk.

Read them slowly. Let the words sink in.

Give the *krisis* space to grow. If you sit with these texts long enough, you can't help but be provoked, for this is the nature of truth. Jesus did not come proclaiming a violent revolution. He didn't use violence or force in putting forth his claims. His claim was himself—a claim that turns the world upside down by rendering all things, all principalities and all powers subservient to one thing only: love. And this claim troubled the authorities so much that they felt that they had no other option than to put him to death.

Let him trouble you, too. Unless, of course, you've got better things to do. ◆

Are you drawn to the Supernatural?

WHY NOT TRY THE REAL THING?

Step into a realm where ancient mysteries breathe new life, inviting you to rediscover the magic that pulses at the heart of faith.

by ***Leo McGrath***

On a chilly beach in southern Scotland in the late 7th Century a monk is wading out into the sea up to his armpits, singing and chanting at the top of his lungs in time with the waves. As he returns to the sand at daybreak, two sea otters follow the monk and lie down in front of him, "warming his feet with their breath and drying him with their fur." After this, the holy man blesses the creatures as they slip back into the waves.

So goes the story of a night in the life of St Cuthbert as retold by St Bede in his biography of the saint. It is a fantastical tale demonstrating the sanctity of the man and the beauty of the mystical world of Christianity to a newly evangelised country. It is also the kind of story that earned Christianity a bad name with 20th-century rationalists as a collection of so many fairy stories.

Really? Otters?

It is rational to dismiss this story out of hand. But to me that seems a little unsatisfying. What happened here? Of course, historically speaking, we can never know. But it's safe to say that this monk's unusual behaviour caught the attention of his brother monks as special, a particularly holy man experiencing God's creation in interesting ways–otters or no otters.

Consider why Bede includes such an unlikely and baffling anecdote. As his mission was to evangelise the emerging nation of England, he had to be credible. As a monk, scholar and historian he wanted to spread tales of local holy people to provide us with models to imitate. It was crucial that they had the ring of truth; then as now, people didn't just believe any old thing.

As a narrative the story is attractive because

In a world increasingly
explained by science,
a touch of mystery
reminds us that there's
always something more
beyond the everyday.

human beings are drawn to the unusual and strange. Somewhere within us a desire for splendour draws us to seek the enchanted. In a mechanised and over-analysed world, a part of us wants stories like this to be real because we are looking for something to break through the humdrum and reassure us that our everyday lives carry meaning beyond that which can be objectively measured.

While modern audiences may greet the story of the otters with scepticism, Bede's audience inhabited a more enchanted world. It was taken for granted that things like this happened all the time, signs of God's (or the gods') intervention in the world. Miracles were all around. Rather than questioning the account literally, readers were more interested in how and why God was working in the world. Stories like this enhanced rather than diminished Bede's credibility because his audience was already attuned to the possibility of the extraordinary.

The End of Enchantment

It is hard for us, downstream of the Enlightenment, Rationalism and Post-Modernism, to inhabit that mental world. Our reality seems mechanistic and knowable, our mental horizons foreclosing the possibility of miracles. While it can be fun to dabble, the idea that gods and devils might be all around us has been an eccentric view for generations. But there are signs that an enchanted perspective is returning.

From Wiccan gatherings to Tarot readings, high-street crystal-sellers to an astrological sign in your dating profile, the evidence is everywhere. Young people are significantly more likely to describe themselves as spiritual than their grandparents. On the third floor of Foyles bookshop you will find a bulging spirituality section facing the books on conventional religions. Standing between those shelves is an oddly moving experience; here is a microcosm of our great and incomplete effort to understand the way things are, to peek through the veil. We crave to perceive the divine (and perhaps the diabolical, too), drawn to its beauties and powers.

This trend reflects the welcome, slow death of atheism and consumerist materialism. Instead, many are opening themselves up to the thrill of the supernatural, from traditional Christianity to the occult. For some, it affords a sense of agency and ritualistic mystery they

feel is missing. For others, it is simply fun to go against the cultural grain. Practices such as tarot, astrology and wicca offer a strange and exciting world and provide answers to the chaos around us where rationalist materialism failed.

It is easy to feel silly when praying, chanting, meditating or responding to the world in a spiritual way, especially when there is no agreement about how we should engage with the supernatural. One person's sincere prayer is another's folly. It's easy to feel that all such practices are just products to consume or a human-made phoney. Should we take it seriously?

The Catholic Church believes that engaging with the spiritual world is always serious and meaningful for the simple reason that we are spiritual beings, made up of soul as well as body. The world is an arena where the forces of good and evil compete through and around us, though they can be hard for us to perceive.

Ultimately, deepening your sense of the spiritual and enchanted nature of the world is an act of seeking truth. The Church's absolute ban on any occultist or spiritualism not focused on God is required precisely because such practices can meaningfully lead people away from truth. We can witness God's power in our enchanted

world, but spiritualism also risks engaging with darker forces that are very real.

It can be helpful to hear stories of engagements with the supernatural in our own age. In her conversion autobiography *Into the Deep*, writer Abigail Favale tells us about her journey from the evangelical Christianity of her childhood, through nihilistic atheism and then finally, and reluctantly, to Catholicism. Late in her journey, she was praying and meditating on the things that were getting in the way of her relationship with God. She had come to believe in good and evil, and that the world of saints, devils and angels was real. This, she realised with a start, meant that her everyday decisions mattered too on a spiritual level.

One evening she had a nagging feeling that something wasn't right. It was a heavy feeling unlike any she had known before. She prayed and asked a priest to bless her house with water from the Holy Land, still somewhat sceptical. Then things started to get a little odd.

She found her bedroom and external doors flung wide open, blasted back against their hinges. They had been opened from the inside, but nothing had been taken. Her child was still safely wrapped up in his bed. Her husband, a non-believer, casually mentioned he had been visited all night by "demonic dreams." What could this be?

Then it struck her. She had some old tarot cards in her house from years ago, stuffed in the attic. That night, to the bemusement of neighbours, she burnt the cards in the back garden. Incredibly, the garden lights–always reliable before and since—flickered incessantly. The circuit breaker went off seven times.

Perhaps she was experiencing a glimpse of the enchanted world she, and we, truly inhabit. One where our spiritual practice matters, and God and demons act on and in the world. Perhaps her house had witnessed a battle of spirits that night.

If you have a suspicion that a reality beyond the material is real but aren't sure how to engage with it in a healthy and meaningful way, the Catholic Church offers a way in.

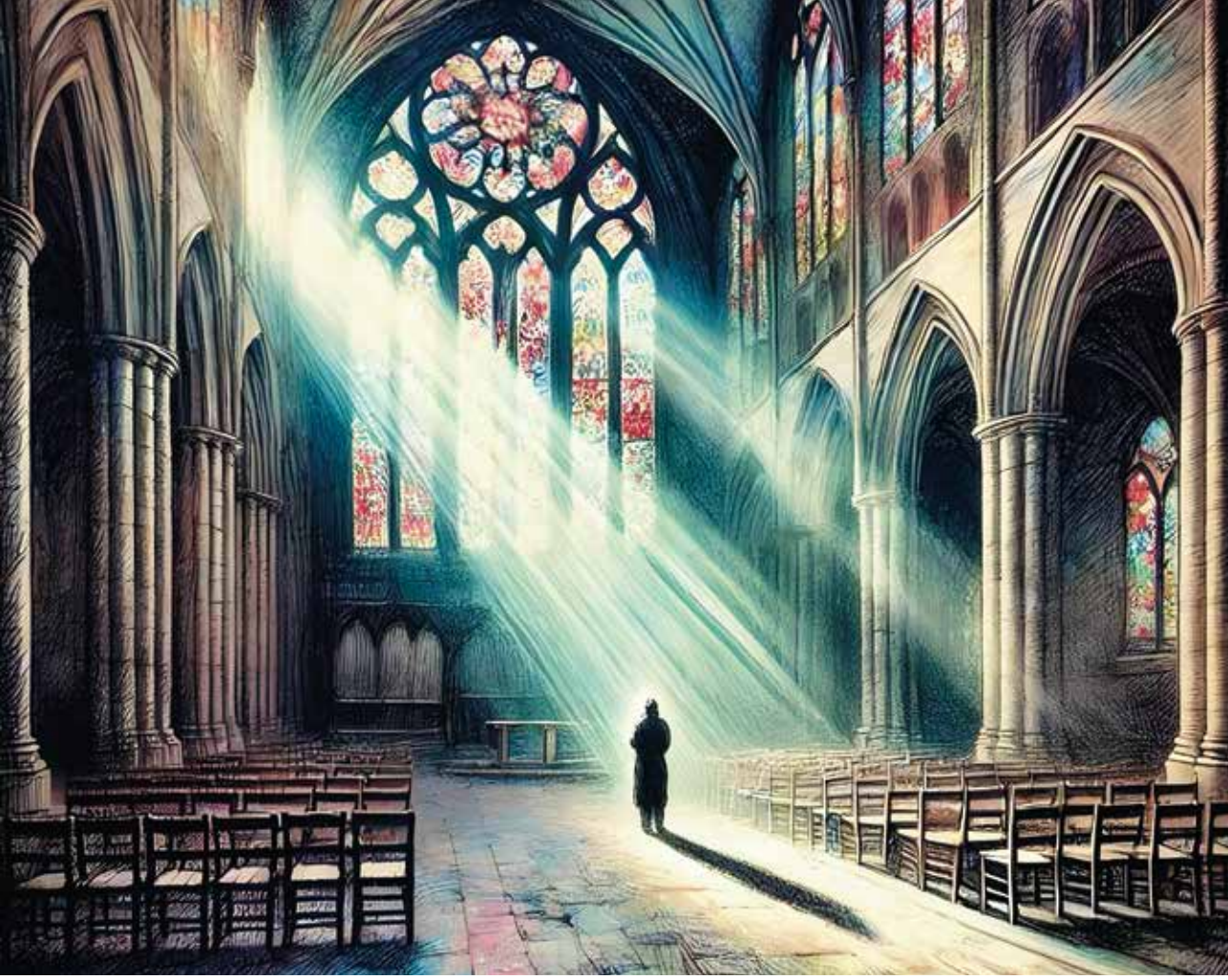
In the Church, miracles are not isolated oddities; they are seen as powerful, tangible encounters with the divine.

The Reality of the Invisible

Sacraments are instruments of encounter with God's grace for us on Earth, a way of engaging with the sublime mystery and power of God and his creation beyond the world of the senses. These are powerful encounters. In the Eucharist, the central miracle of the Mass, God literally enters the world again, body and spirit, to enable us to be joined to Him. There is no more powerful way to gain a deeper understanding of reality - and no more powerful force to be experienced.

Why is this so different from the rest? Some gods and demons are pure spirit and can only be communed with spiritually. Worship of nature, things or people, meanwhile, limits our engagement to the world we observe so we can never truly engage with the non-material world.

Christ's sacrifice, in contrast, is unique. By dying and rising



again for us, He is fully a part of the spiritual and physical world. Thus, God became human like us in Christ, and in turn enables us to become God-like. This is the real thing.

In the sacraments, God intervenes in the world, enchanting it anew and enabling us to encounter him intimately by receiving His grace, the life-giving force of creation in an infinitely good way. Tales of transformational encounters are everywhere: miracle cures, bodies of holy men and women remaining impossibly intact, unredeemable prisoners being reformed. Instead of dismissing Cuthbert's otters, consider opening your mind again to the impossible.

It is tempting to go our own way, to develop our own spiritual practices, beliefs and teachings. But this can be a risky road to travel. Given the seriousness with which we should treat spiritual practice, can we all say with certainty that we have the wisdom, courage and strength to understand the spiritual world without help? Not sure I can!

The rules and rituals of the Church that keep us to a sacramental and prayerful life are enablers, not restraints. Every engagement with prayer, every participation in communion, confession or baptism, sanctifies our world in a way we can know and trust to be good absolutely. The Church's guidance helps us to experience the supernatural as divinely ordered and enriching, rather than something overwhelming that we must manage alone.

Participating is an awe-inspiring encounter with a deeper reality–that of a personal, loving and almighty God whose mysteries are infinite and open for us to discover. The Catholic Church offers just such an authentic encounter. The Lord is inviting you to his feast and the door is always open. Why settle for half-truths, when you can have the real thing? ◆

A 90-Day trial in Catholic Living

APPROACH IT AS AN EXPERIMENT

For the spiritually curious, here's a way to step in from the sidelines and you can choose to leave at any point with no explanation.

by ***Jo-Ann Pereira***

It can feel safer to stand back when something sacred asks us to step forward. For example on Sundays at Mass, I ask people I don't know if they'd like to help carry the gifts—the bread, wine and offertory—to the altar.

I often encounter someone who responds apologetically, "But I'm not a Christian," expecting me to move on. With just five minutes before the bell rings for Mass, I find myself offering a simple explanation: "All you need is a willing heart, feet to walk and hands to carry." Many times, a frown softens, I sense a quiet sigh of relief, and I'm delighted when they say yes. I think I understand, at least in part, that responding to the invitation is not easy.

I was raised Catholic, and for a time I left the Church. I embraced an atheistic view of life and did my best to live by it, reminding myself that life was entirely concrete and visible—strongly resisting the belief of anything mystical. Somehow though, I missed the ethereal: feelings I got from holding a rosary, the scent of incense, the ringing of church bells, the flicker of a candle, the sound of a choir. These helped me connect with the invisible and perhaps more real experiences that went beyond the limits of my senses. I was inevitably drawn back to church. This time, I brought my own questions, not just the ones I had been taught to ask.

At church, I regularly meet people who seem to be passing through—visiting for a moment of calm, maybe some quiet or stillness. If this is you, I wonder: what would happen if, instead of staying on the periphery, you gave it a try?

If you've ever found yourself in a pew wondering what's expected of you, know this:

there's room to show up honestly, even if you're not sure where you stand. One quiet way this is expressed is during Communion. Those who aren't Catholic—or who don't yet feel ready to receive the Eucharist—can still come forward, arms crossed over the chest, to receive a simple blessing. It's a way of saying, I'm here, I'm open, but I'm still finding my footing. No performance, no pressure—just a step toward belonging.

In the spirit of taking this on as an experiment, ethical research requires of participants to provide informed consent to participate in any study. Certain key questions to inform your participation if you so choose to try this, comprise:

- Why take part?
- What's involved?
- What might happen?

Why take part?

The Church is not short of ordinary people—across time, cultures and personalities—who have embraced Catholic living. Saints like Thomas Aquinas, Joan of Arc, Ignatius of Loyola and Josephine Bakhita shaped law, politics, and education, and endured trauma without bitterness. Others, like Thérèse of Lisieux, Saint Joseph, and Carlos Acutis may be less famous, but equally show the quiet strength of faith.

Of course, there are reasons to hesitate that could contribute to not taking part in this experiment: scandals in the Church, difficult teachings on sexuality or gender, miracle stories that feel irrational or rigid expressions of guilt. These are serious, important and necessary considerations. The church has embraced these topics. Catholicism has a long tradition of honest questioning—for example from saints like Aquinas, Ignatius, and John Henry Newman. This experiment isn't about having clear answers to theological or social questions surrounding the church and its history, rather it's about an intimate response to the sacred in your heart.

What's involved?

It starts with an openness that fosters curiosity, sometimes even of the familiar, not dismissing small acts - and trusting in something bigger might be intervening in our lives.

This experiment is ultimately about a relationship with God, where we believe that God makes the first move. The Catechism says this calling to eternal life is supernatural. It depends entirely on God's initiative. He reveals Himself freely. Our role is to be willing. To quote from the Catechism, "This vocation to eternal life is supernatural. It depends entirely on God's gratuitous initiative, for he alone can reveal and give himself. It surpasses the power of human intellect and will, as that of every other creature." (CCC 1998)

So what is this relationship with God like? In essence: love. First to receive love as the beloved. Then to love others. As the Catechism says: "God himself is an eternal exchange of love—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and has destined us to share in that exchange."

So many different people—intelligent, grounded, wounded, curious—have found something real in Catholicism. Enough that they stayed. Some even died for it.

Try these practices:

- Attend weekly Mass (or more if you feel drawn).
- Pray daily. That could mean honest conversation with God, praying the Our Father, or saying the rosary.
- Join in community—maybe a Bible group or social event.
- Choose a saint who intrigues you and ask for their intercession.
- Keep a journal of your thoughts, feelings and questions.
- Talk to someone you trust—a priest, a nun, a thoughtful Catholic—if things come up.

What might happen?

You might already be aware of how you respond to challenge: do you dive in, resist, overthink? Alternatively, this may be a new kind of challenge where you can discover more about how you process the changes to come.

In the first weeks, expect some awkwardness. The rituals and language may feel strange. Begin reflectively and let yourself ease into more active participation. Savour the experience.

By the end of the 90 days, you may have some answers, but you'll know more about whether Catholic practice speaks to you.

A few gentle reminders: if you tend to overanalyse, it may block openness. We all have limits. If strong feelings arise, talk to someone. There's no shame in slowing down. As St John Henry Newman wrote while seriously ill in his prayer "Lead Kindly Light":

"I do not ask to see the distant scene; one step enough for me."

Finally, remember that you're free to leave.

As with any experiment, you are free to stop at any time. You don't owe any explanation. And whatever the outcome—positive, negative, or mixed—this experience won't be wasted. It might deepen you. It might surprise you. It might give you something real.

You've nothing to prove.

Only to receive.

Why not try? ◆

In the middle weeks, you may feel a surprising comfort.

The rhythm of Mass or prayer might feel familiar.

You may notice new spiritual needs or insights.

BUILD-YOUR-OWN PERSONALITY: JUST ADD EXHAUSTION

The Essence of Self-Betrayal

HOW TO STOP BEING SUCH A SAD PEOPLE PLEASER

Why trying to be liked is making you miserable—and how Jesus shows a better way.

by ***Marie Moore***

Agreeable to a fault? During the last season of Lent, I was invited once again to reflect on my flaws, the many ways I fall short of the divine perfection God intends for us all. While I could easily write an entire essay about those, one of the faults that did not immediately come to mind was the trait that could be termed "people pleasing."

How often do you have the experience of agreeing with something you don't really think, only to feel annoyed at yourself a few minutes later? I would bet that for a lot of people this happens fairly regularly. It's a form of people pleasing. Most of us could point out people-pleasing behaviour when we see it, but as an informal definition I consider it to be agreeableness taken too far, to the point where it begins to have a negative impact. One of the Big Five personality traits, agreeableness describes behaviours that are friendly, cooperative, kind, and polite. As one might expect, women tend to score more highly on this trait than men. For the record, while I would not say I am a disagreeable person, I would likely more closely resemble the average man than the average woman in this particular personality trait.

When 'polite is problematic"

I am not advocating that people act inconsiderately for the sake of it. Politeness is essential for any functioning society, and London post-pandemic could certainly do with a little more of it. When agreeableness tips over into people pleasing though, it becomes a problem. Consider times when you nod along to opinions you don't believe at all; when you let someone else take credit for your idea because it would cause a fuss if you spoke up; when you do someone else's work because everyone on the team

knows you won't complain if assignments are dumped on you with no warning or consultation.

The high cost of keeping everybody happy

Why do I so object to people pleasing? It would arguably make life a little less difficult if I could bring myself to mumble, "Yes, definitely," in response to an opinion I consider absolutely deranged and have lost friends over my refusal to do so. I suppose it's because I consider it first and foremost to be fundamentally dishonest; it's a self-betrayal.

Moreover, people pleasing is stressful. I have yet to meet someone who is both excessively agreeable and who genuinely does not mind when people take advantage of this. On the other hand, I know a number of highly agreeable people who deeply resent bending over backwards for others and getting little in return. People are also fickle and public opinion can change quickly. Forever curating one's personality according to their whims is exhausting.

Betraying our gifts

If artists, writers and musicians have to create works that avoid offending anyone, avoid criticising anyone, then the end product becomes so dully pointless that we might as well outsource it to AI and call it a day.

At heart, nearly all of us feel a need to be appreciated and to belong. Billion-dollar industries, from wellness to beauty to fashion to therapy, are all predicated on the idea that if we can get ourselves just right, both inside and out, then we will be better loved. While there's nothing wrong with any of these industries in and of themselves, they can take advantage of a spiritual hunger that is misdirected. The Catholic Church offers an alternative. Its liturgy demands nothing more of you than to show up just as you are, to be present as we celebrate the astonishing fact that God became man to save us from our sin, simply because he loves us.

Jesus didn't people please–and neither should you

Christians have an additional reason not to be people pleasers and it is that Jesus certainly was not. His life was the ultimate demonstration of love (John 15:13), but he regularly upset people with his preaching, so much that they eventually decided to kill him.

I particularly appreciate this passage of Matthew (15:12-14): "Then the disciples approached and said to him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?'' Unphased, he tells the disciples to "... Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind."

In John 6 we again read of dissatisfaction with Jesus's preaching, with his own followers complaining that "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" In response, Jesus asks, "Does this offend you?" and the answer must have been yes for a decent number of them because the chapter ends with many of his disciples leaving him.

People pleasing renders genuine creativity nearly impossible.

Following Jesus's example is the best way to stop being a people pleaser. Although it was doubtlessly painful to have so many people criticise and abandon him, he was able to continue his ministry because his identity was firmly rooted in his relationship with the Father. We too need to remember that being created in the image of God is what gives us our intrinsic worth. The Bible demonstrates that being part of a community is important, as are our relationships with friends and family, but these must ultimately come after our relationship with God. Once we have these priorities in order we are much better equipped to confront difficult people and situations. Criticism still stings and losing a friend is always painful, but these things do not have the power to break you if know that your first duty is to the God who loves you exactly as you are. ◆

The Planet Needs Your Heart More Than Your Hashtag

WHAT IF THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS A SPIRITUAL CRISIS?

A climate expert grapples with ecological grief and the slow work of inner conversion—discovering that caring for creation begins not with outrage, but with prayer, humility and hope.

by ***Maria Carvalho***

These days when I scroll through my newsfeed, I wonder if the four horsemen of the Apocalypse have finally arrived.

Fires, hurricanes, wars, droughts, vanishing forests, and yet another species gone extinct. Beneath the polarised battle cries, I sense a quickening ache—not just for answers, but for something sacred, eternal, safe.

In 2016, Professor Lord Nicholas Stern, the renowned economist behind the landmark Stern Review, was invited to reflect on advising the late Pope Francis during the writing of *Laudato Si*: Care for Our Common Home. Speaking at the London School of Economics, he quipped: "My heritage is Jewish, but I am a confirmed atheist. And my father would be rolling in his grave if he heard me say, 'This is my favourite Pope.'"

Why? "This Pope is able to take complex ideas and make them simple, real and meaningful."

As an LSE Master's student, I was there in 2006 when Lord Stern launched The Economics of Climate Change Report . Since then, I've worked in academia and the private sector, advising governments, institutions and corporations on climate challenges amid sweeping technological and societal change.

And yet, the deeper I went into climate work, the more *Laudato Si* began to feel essential. Because what it offers—beyond science and policy—is a spiritual diagnosis. And spiritual medicine.

The Science Is Settled—But Injustice Isn't

Laudato Si doesn't challenge climate science; it affirms it. The Pope worked with leading scientists and economists to clearly state that climate change and ecological collapse are human driven. The encyclical's purpose is to offer the

Church's moral stance—not only for Catholics, but for everyone. It's an invitation to every human being to care for creation.

Science explains how industrialisation, starting in the 18th century, altered how we produce, consume, and discard—thereby destabilising—the Earth's systems. After World War II, the pace of damage accelerated so rapidly that scientists now speak of a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene.

Economic growth has lifted billions from poverty—but its benefits are uneven. The wealthiest consume and waste the most, and the poorest suffer most from environmental breakdown. Food, water, energy insecurity - along with hurricanes, floods and fires - fall hardest on those with the fewest resources. *Laudato Si* ties this environmental crisis directly to inequality—within and across generations.

Why Policy Alone Isn't Enough

The usual antidote offered is a new "green" industrial revolution—deploying the right technologies through the right mix of economic and social policy. And we need that.

But what counts as "right?" Who decides? Can we act fast enough? Even among those who agree on the urgency, consensus splinters. Meanwhile, the pace of planetary breakdown continues.

It's overwhelming to imagine how we might reform the entire global economy to live within Earth's limits. We've already exceeded some of those limits. It's no wonder climate anxiety is on the rise—and with it, despair, nihilism, even rage.

The Question Behind the Question

One of my pet peeves is when someone asks, "Are you optimistic we'll beat climate change?" That's like asking a soldier on the beaches of Normandy if they're optimistic about winning the war.

A better question: Regardless of outcome, are you willing to give your life to make the world better?

An atheist colleague and I both agree—to do this work, we must pass through grief. But staying in despair helps no one. We need a path through. We both agree that the path is spiritual. His practice is running and meditation. Mine is contemplative prayer, walking in nature, and surrendering my heart, soul and self to God.

Reading *Laudato Si* helped me realise: this relationship with God is what gives me strength to keep going. It's where I draw my vocation—to protect His creation.

Dominion Is Not Domination

Genesis tells us that creation is a gift—made by God from love and declared good. When I walk in nature, I marvel at how sunlight becomes chlorophyll in a leaf, or how convection cycles sculpt clouds in the sky. The more I understand the science of creation, the more I praise the Creator.

That's what *Laudato Si* means—"Praise be to you," echoing St Francis of Assisi's Canticle of Creatures. Sun, wind, water, and earth all proclaim God's goodness.

Sin is not just doing bad things — it's the disordered desire to consume without limits.

To take more than our share.

To believe that we are entitled.

Contemplating creation leads to a desire to protect it. That desire comes from God. In Genesis, God gives Adam "dominion" over creation—but this never meant domination. It meant stewardship. A moral responsibility to care for our common home, in justice and love.

The Interior Ecology of Sin

Laudato Si asks: So why don't we care for it? Why do we keep exploiting it?

I don't think of myself as greedy, but I do want comfort, convenience, and an Instagram-worthy life. That often means I make choices that feed a throwaway culture—choices that aren't in right relationship with the earth or with God.

But naming those sins is healing. They show me what I'm compensating for. Disposable choices reflect a lack of time, energy, or purpose. My craving for admiration reveals a shaky sense of self-worth. My frustration in arguments exposes my lack of patience and love.

Facing these things lets me turn back to God. And prayer becomes a way to begin again.

The story of the Fall offers a clue. Like Adam, we turn away from God in our desire to be in control.

Prayer as Planetary Surrender

Walking in nature and praying slows me down. It helps me breathe. It helps me ask God to heal what's wounded in me—so I don't pass that wound on to others or to the planet.

Prayer reminds me: I am not God. And the fate of the world does not rest on my shoulders alone.

Instead, prayer is a space where I let God work through me. The saints knew this—that miracles begin not with force, but with surrender.

God called Noah to build an ark. Moses to lead. Jesus to bear the cross. God always works through the humble—and never fails to redeem.

The Foolishness of Faith

Some say I'm foolish to hope we can avert ecological collapse. But I've seen real progress.

In 2006, the world was on track for 4 degrees of warming. Now we're headed closer to 2. In 2010, global climate talks fell apart in Copenhagen. By 2015, 196 countries united in Paris. In 2008, people laughed at phasing out coal. By 2024, the UK closed its last coal plant—replacing it with mostly low-carbon electricity and gas.

This isn't naive optimism - it is determination. People are already suffering. More will suffer.

I've found a global community of people willing to fight for a better future—in policy, in science, in faith. That collective courage, I believe, comes from somewhere. I believe it comes from God.

So I trust Him. And I keep going.

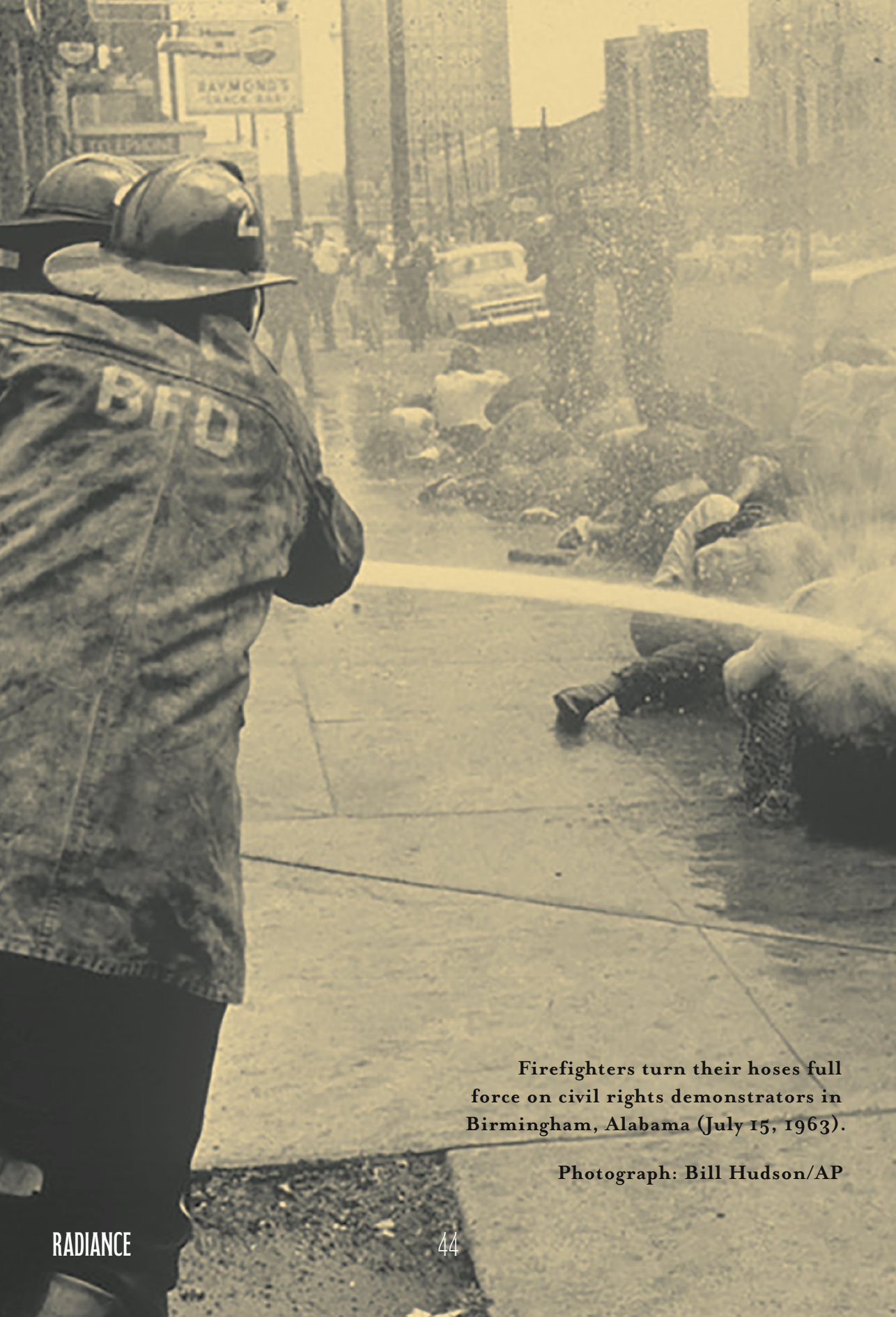
Hope in a Time of Collapse

If anxiety about the future—personal or planetary—leaves you feeling hopeless, try walking in silence among the trees. Breathe slowly. Sync your body to the slow rhythm of the earth.

If you want to act, start by praying—for peace, for courage, for a clear intention.

If you're not sure where to begin, read Laudato Si not as policy but as a love letter—from the Church, to creation. And to you.

And if you want to be part of a movement, check out the Laudato Si Movement, launched by the Pope to unite people across the world to care for our common home. ◆



Firefighters turn their hoses full force on civil rights demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama (July 15, 1963).

Photograph: Bill Hudson/AP

More than Repositories of History

HOW MUSEUMS CAN ACCELERATE YOUR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

What can a civil rights museum in Alabama teach a Benedictine monk about faith and hope? More than you might think.

by ***Christopher Jamison, OSB***

In 2003, I attended a workshop for abbots at a monastery in Alabama. As part of the program, we visited the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI). Initially, I was not exactly excited to go. Growing up on the British Museum and the Louvre, I couldn't imagine what this museum could offer. But that visit changed me.

The BCRI's mission is to "enlighten each generation about civil and human rights by exploring our common past and working together in the present to build a better future." Its exhibits recount the horrors of segregation while celebrating the progress made through courage and grace.

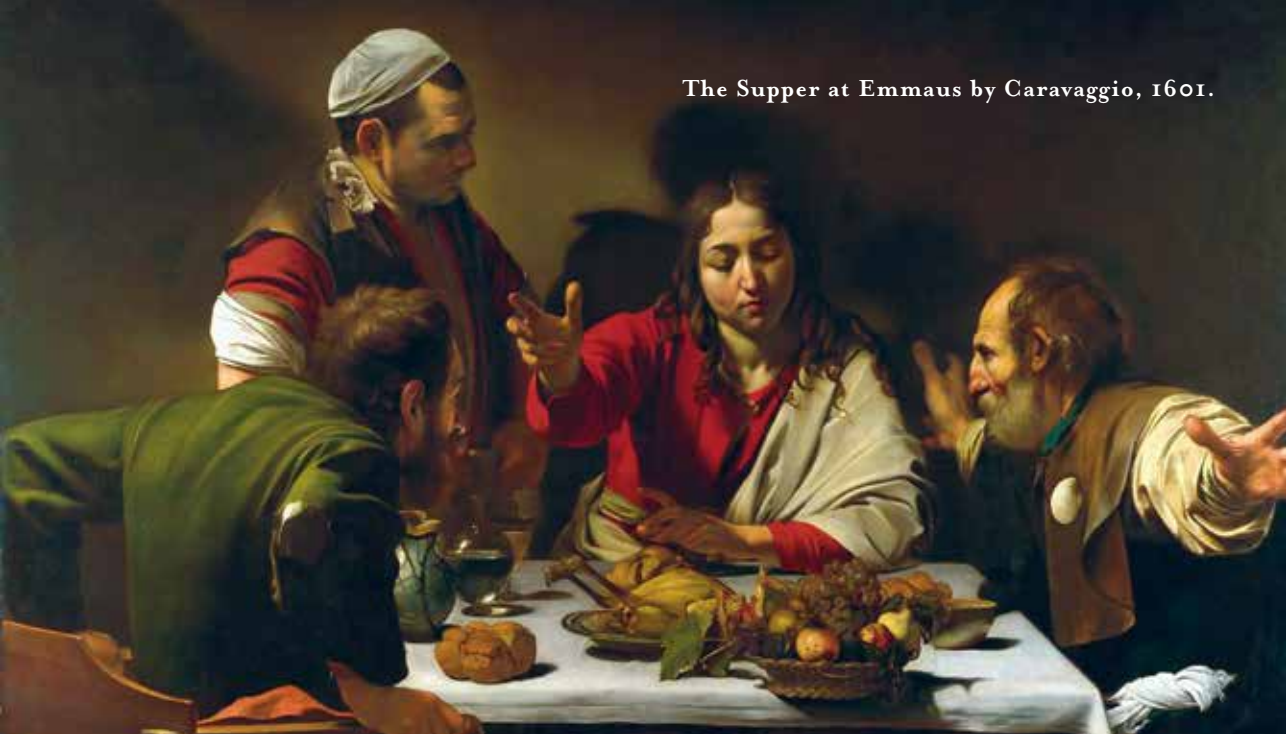
Guides proudly wearing "I walked with MLK" badges shared personal stories of struggle and hope. We watched a film describing the Jim Crow laws, we saw newsreel footage of dogs and fire hoses turned on black children, we sat in part of a segregated restaurant that had been moved to the museum. Sitting in that recreated segregated restaurant, I could feel the weight of history pressing down on me. But then, hearing the stories of triumph and progress, I felt a surge of hope.

By showing how past injustices can lead to positive change, this museum became more than a repository of history; it became a repository of hope.

Migration Museums: Expanding Compassion

Barbara Roche, born to Jewish parents and passionate about migration, founded London's Migration Museum in 2011. Inspired by the Ellis Island Museum in New York, this museum uses stories and artefacts to spark empathy and understanding. From its beginnings as a pop-up exhibition, it has grown into a vital space for dialogue about migration—a topic more relevant than ever.

Think of a museum visit not as just Instagram-worthy, but as soul-worthy. These places are the ultimate backdrop for spiritual growth.



The Supper at Emmaus by Caravaggio, 1601.

Walking through its exhibits, I found parallels to my Alabama experience. Stories of suffering, resilience, and hope confront visitors. They challenge us to see migrants not as statistics but as people. For Christians, these stories deepen our spiritual practice. By expanding our hearts with compassion, we grow closer to Christ, who was himself a migrant.

Art Galleries as Sacred Spaces

Museums of art also have a profound role in spiritual growth. For me, the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square is a sacred space. One painting, The Supper at Emmaus by Caravaggio, never fails to stir my faith. Sitting on the bench in front of it for 15 minutes often feels more prayerful than visiting a church. The reverence people bring to galleries offers a quiet sanctuary. Art celebrating Christ's life reminds us of the divine beauty and truth that transcend time.

Seeing Faith Through Ancient Artefacts

Even museums of historic artefacts can inspire spirituality. During a visit to the British Museum, I stood before the massive reproduction of the Balawat gates from ancient Assyria. These seven-meter-high gates symbolise power. And, as I gazed up, Psalm 24 came alive: "O gates, lift high your heads, grow higher ancient doors, let the King of glory enter." That moment turned the museum into a cathedral of sorts, connecting ancient culture to my faith.

Climate Museums: A Positopian Vision

The emerging Climate Museums in the UK and US offer yet another avenue for spiritual growth. These spaces address environmental challenges not with despair but with "positopian" hope—neither utopian nor dystopian. They foster conversations around science, art, and lifestyle, encouraging visitors to envision a better future.

Such museums show how faith and action can intersect. They remind us that stewarding creation is a sacred duty, and hope is an essential part of the journey.

Bringing Faith to the Museum

When we take our faith into a museum, it expands. Visiting with spiritual eyes transforms museums from tourist attractions to places of encounter—with history, humanity and God. The lessons and hope these spaces offer deepen our own spiritual journey.

Next time you visit a museum, don't just snap a selfie and check it off your list. Look for the stories of resilience, grace, and hope. You might just walk away with more than inspiration; you might walk away changed. ◆

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