

EPILOGUE: WHAT'S NEXT?

Credo ut intelligam was the terse motto for Christian faith deftly coined almost a thousand years ago by St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury. “I believe so that I might understand.” Unfortunately, I don’t understand the afterlife, and even though I am named after my Great Uncle James Anthony Walsh, a Roman Catholic bishop recently beatified (one step from sainthood) for founding the Maryknoll order of missionary priests just over a hundred years ago; even after being raised in a Roman Catholic family that not only got to Mass every Sunday but sometimes got down on our knees all over the living room floor to finger rosary beads and pray (5 x 10 Our Fathers punctuated by Hail Marys); even though I was taught by nuns for five years followed by eight years of Jesuit tutelage; and finally, even though I left Catholicism for a time and then returned to it before later joining the St. Thomas Episcopal Church of Hanover, whose sensitive and academically savvy rector (Guy Collins) now brings the Eucharist to me at home once a week, I still don’t really know what I believe about the afterlife.

The Roman Catholic Church of America is in very tough shape. Even if I could bring myself to turn back to it for guidance, it would offer little or no help because it is now verging on schism. Incensed by even the baby steps that Pope Francis has taken toward reform, such as blessing gay marriages and calling a synod that might dare even to *consider* the ordination of women, reactionary clerics such as Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas and even a cardinal named Raymond Burke have attacked the pope so fiercely and relentlessly that he finally sacked them both.

In the name of rigid doctrine, the American Catholic Church has long waged war on progressive politics, above all on any concessions to a woman's most basic political rights. In 2004, when Democrats nominated for president the first Roman Catholic it had chosen since John F. Kennedy in 1960, the Archbishop of Denver—Charles Chaput—threatened to excommunicate anyone who voted for John Kerry (a devout Catholic) because Kerry opposed—and still does—the criminalizing of abortion.

In other words, though the American Catholic church has never argued that we should criminalize the sin of idolatry, which the First Amendment implicitly sanctions (freedom to worship means freedom to worship *anything*, right?), you can't be a good Catholic unless you think the sin of abortion as defined by the church has to be a crime for all. For the same reason Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone of San Francisco declared in May 2022 that Nancy Pelosi, another devout Catholic of great political distinction, could no longer receive the Eucharist in that diocese, where she lives, though she received it late the following month at a Papal Mass in St. Peter's Basilica (take that, Your Eminence!).

The worst part about the American bishops' holy war against the de-criminalization of abortion is that it springs from willful ignorance of Christian tradition itself. Centuries before Thomas Jefferson declared that the First Amendment erected "a wall of separation between church and state," two of the greatest saints in the history of Christendom-- Augustine and Thomas Aquinas—built one after the other a wall of separation between sin and crime.

Consider first what Aquinas wrote about prostitution. He found it unequivocally evil because it violates “natural law” and fails to provide for the care of offspring. He called it a "sin committed directly against human life" and therefore a "mortal sin" binding the soul to spiritual death.

But guess what? He also thought civil authorities should *tolerate* it. And for backup on this point, he quoted Saint Augustine. "In human government," Aquinas writes, "those who are in authority rightly tolerate certain evils, lest certain goods be lost, or certain evils be incurred: thus Augustine says [*De Ordine* 2:4]: 'If you do away with harlots, the world will be convulsed with lust.'" (*Summa Theologica* 2-2.10.11).

My point here is not that we should now legalize prostitution. It is that unlike the woefully benighted American bishops of our time, Aquinas and Augustine both understood the difference between sin and crime, between divine law and human law. **Since human law aims not to promote eternal salvation but to ensure temporal order, it cannot**

-- says Aquinas -- "forbid all vicious acts" (*Summa Theologica* 1-2.96.3).

Ever since the Dobbs decision allowed states such as Texas to criminalize all kinds of abortion, no matter how justified by medical necessity or other circumstances, we have seen precisely what Aquinas foresaw eight centuries ago: the "evils incurred" by our refusal to "rightly tolerate" sin in the secular, temporal world. In recklessly criminalizing the sin of abortion, Texas and its like-minded sisters have wrought havoc with the "temporal order" that "human law aims . . . to ensure." And do you really believe, Your Excellencies, that by abetting this havoc you are promoting anyone's eternal salvation?

While high American clerics obsess over gay rights and any attempt to accommodate women whose very lives may be threatened by doomed pregnancies they cannot legally terminate, the Catholic priesthood reels from an ongoing sequence of scandals. According to bishops.accountability.com, lawsuits filed since 2004 have forced into bankruptcy no fewer than 35 Roman Catholic dioceses and religious

orders in America. Altogether, the church has paid over \$4 billion to settle over 8,600 cases (including one payout of \$660 million), and according to the Associated Press, the church may yet have to pay another \$4 billion to settle 5,000 new cases. Only God knows (if anybody does) when this will end.

I must hasten to say that during all my time with nuns and Jesuit priests from 1946 to 1960, I never knew a single case of sexual abuse—with one alarming exception. In 1951, my 19-year-old brother Tim was nearly raped by a priest whom he successfully resisted. (Tim was a good wrestler.) When he told my parents, they would not believe him. No priest, they thought, would ever do such a thing.

I dig up this particular dark memory as an acid test of my own residues of faith, which at its best—paradoxically—feeds on the very doubts they provoke. But as I head into the darkness of death myself, you might ask, what are my thoughts about the afterlife?

For a start I've arranged to be cremated, and as an incorrigible punster, I can't resist saying that the very thought of being cremated

really burns me up. I also can't help remembering what my mother heard one day from a good friend and jolly lady named Jerry Hefler, who called to say that her late husband had just appeared to her in a dream. "How did he look?" my mother asked. "He looked terrible," she said. "He'd been cremated!" Of all the times I heard my mother laugh, which she readily did at least once a day, I never heard her laugh as she did then. Her explosion rocked the house.

My own ashes are bound for a pigeonhole in the stone columbarium—a granite dovecot!—standing just outside the side door of St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Hanover, where beforehand I will get a proper sendoff: I've already drafted the program myself, complete (I fondly hope) with a choir singing at least some of the passages from the magnificent *Requiem* of Gabriel *Fauré*, which I first learned to sing and love at Georgetown over sixty years ago. OK, then: assuming my ashes will somehow recompose themselves into a transfigured me and then somehow ascend to the pearly gates, what's up there? According to St. Paul, the only witness of that undiscovered country from which no

other traveller (pace Shakespeare's Hamlet) ever returned, heaven is simply indescribable:

Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for them that love Him. (1 Corinthians 2:9).

But I have long cherished my own mad fantasy. I sometimes imagine heaven—or at least the gateway to it—as a gigantic cocktail party. An impeccably manicured emerald lawn stretching to the edge of a cloud overlooking the Milky Way and the heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit (which I have just stolen from *Ulysses* like the pears once swiped by a boy named Augustine). At the bar, Dom Perignon champagne and Montrachet Grand Cru and 1982 Chateau Lafite Rothschild and—for vulgarians--single malted Scotch and every other kind of booze you could possibly want. Round tables everywhere groaning under scads of delectable hors d'oeuvres. And irresistibly charming cherubs circulating everywhere to top up your glass every few seconds.

A few minutes after arriving, I meet a stylish, blonde, fiftyish lady in a close fitting sleeveless red dress, impeccably coiffed and maquillaged, with a waist-length string of subtly glowing pearls and gold bracelets adorning her slinky bare arms. Soon after we meet, she says to me, “Have you met God? He’s *absolutely* divine.”

That would be fun. But even after meeting him (Him? Her?), what would happen after the party?

I can’t really say that I look forward to anything like eternal rest, *requiem aeternam*. Of course I wouldn’t opt for an eternity of hellfire or even temporarily—for some unspecified number of days, weeks, or years--the flames of purgatory. But the prospect of lying around on a cloud *for all eternity* seems too monotonous to imagine. For me as for most people, I suspect, life on earth has been a succession of changes and new things: ups and downs: setbacks, milestones, highs, lows, surprises, and just plain fun. I really wouldn’t know what to do with an eternity of nothing but rest.

On the other hand, as Pope Francis famously said about gay priests in the Catholic church, who am I to judge? Who am I to second guess St.

Paul, the only man who ever went to heaven and came back to tell us what he saw, however indescribable? So unlike Dylan Thomas, I will not rage against the dying of earthly light. On the contrary, as the final cloak of mortal darkness envelops me, I may perhaps just begin to glimpse—or even to understand, *intelligere*—the light of eternity and the eternity of light.

And one more thing. Though I make no claims to literary immortality, though I have built no monument more lasting than bronze, as Horace once wrote of his poetry, I like to think that at least some of my words may have an afterlife on earth.

Among my favorite words of the New Testament are the words of Luke: “From whom much is given, much will be required” (Luke 12:48). From my parents, my siblings, my relatives, my mentors, and the scores of friends I’ve been lucky enough to make for scores of years, I have received more than I could ever repay. But I hope I have made at least a modest return on their investment.

And one *more* thing. What *really* excites me about heaven is the prospect of meeting there at least some of the many people—or some of

the souls—that I have known and loved on earth. Above all Roy J. Heffenan, Junior, the older brother I never knew because he died at the age of 13 just weeks before Tom and I were born. But his soul must now be 98 years old, and at the moment of my death, perhaps, Royboy will come for me just as he reportedly came for each of my parents in turn at their final moments. He and I will have a lot to talk about—for a long long long time. Maybe even for eternity.