

**The first submission is an editorial that recently appeared in the *National Catholic Reporter*.**

### **Liberals dying or hiding?**

The proposition that liberal Catholicism is dying has been offered from time to time, for decades now, often in a way that reminds one of the schoolyard scuffler more interested in the fight than in any point being made.

The extended period over which such assertion has been made, of course, argues against its validity. But one of the most recent forays, by Charlotte Allen, a professional provocateur of sorts in religion-writing circles, is worthy of some consideration not only because of the buzz her Jan. 15 piece has been making around and about the ether, but also because the rather frayed and confused arguments she posits could do with some trimming and straightening.

Allen uses the recent death of theologian Mary Daly, a radical feminist, to launch her assessment that “the flame of Catholic dissent” is dying out. One has to accept a premise that can only be inferred from the piece, that no distinction exists among theologians -- from Daly to Fr. Charles Curran, to Fr. Hans Küng, to Sr. Sandra Schneiders, to the late Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx. Her broad brush is applied to anyone who might have drawn some notice from the Vatican about his or her theology. It doesn't take much investigation of Catholic intellectual tradition to discover that some of the sainted giants of the past were, in their own time (Thomas Aquinas among them), on the outs with church authority only to be later rehabilitated.

So one period's dissenters could easily be another period's great minds. There's little discussion of substance in her observations.

... We presume from the names she mentions that Allen is referring to a period of Catholicism that would include the modern liturgical reformers and the theological experts from around the world who produced the documents of Vatican II, opening up ministry in a much greater way to laypeople, including women, and deepening the church's commitment to social justice issues. If the project is now fading, it certainly leaves behind quite a legacy.

It is not overstating the case to say that without such reforms throughout the ecclesial body many places today would not have a functioning church. Without the tens of thousands of lay ministers, for instance, most dioceses would be unable to function or to teach the next generation of Catholics; there would be no music at Mass and no servers and readers. Ministries of outreach to the poor and homeless, to those in prisons, would go wanting. Chaplaincies of every sort would remain unfilled.

No matter how far some would like to push reform of the reforms, the truth is that sooner than later need meets the theology that has already been fashioned. The church goes on, in large measure, because of the reforms initiated by such the figures mentioned in Allen's piece.

Yet, the question remains: Where are their successors in the academy? Has the project gone sour? Has it run its course?

Perhaps.

... The chill that has been placed on speculation and thinking of the sort that raises discomfiting questions is probably the greatest cause for the lack of theological enterprise in this era. John Paul, for all of his greatness, dragged the church through a kind of repeat of the anti-modernist campaigns of more than a century ago. And we know that that campaign immeasurably set back Catholic intellectual pursuit. Meanwhile, if consistent surveys are correct, the young may not be attached to the liberal project and the institution as we of another generation might have been. They might also be casting about for a sense of home and put off by the lack of tolerance of questions and the lack of place for women within the institution, as well as by the scandalous conduct of the hierarchy. But we also know that they are deeply attracted to some of Catholicism's best traditions of spirituality and to its richly developed social justice teachings.

Catholic culture has changed irrevocably over the course of the past 50 years. The parochial structure we knew as the iconic Catholic presence in U.S. culture is fading and morphing into something else. No one knows exactly what shape it will take. We are the inheritors of both the "liberal" initiatives embodied in Vatican II and the storms of reaction against them.

The theological giants who fashioned those initiatives are certainly aging, but it would be unwise to jump too quickly to conclusions about the fate of what they leave behind.

**The full article is available at** <http://ncronline.org/news/liberals-dying-or-hiding>

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**Daniel O'Rourke is a married Catholic priest. He offers the following thoughts about Lent. This article first appeared in *The (Dunkirk, NY) Observer* on February 25<sup>th</sup>.**

Lent Is for Giving Not Giving Up

Most religions have their sacred days and times. Jews celebrate the Sabbath. Muslims keep Ramadan. Hindus practice Purnima, and some Christians observe Lent. Such observances have great spiritual meaning, but they can also lead to some bizarre, legalistic craziness.

For Catholic and some Protestant Christians, Lent began on Ash Wednesday. For me, Lent brings back a rush of memories. As children we were taught to "give up" things for Lent. We did. It was usually candy, which wouldn't have been such a bad idea for our diets or dentist's bills. But when Lent was over some of us gorged ourselves on the same candy we had systematically stashed away.

A former pastor of mine confessed that as a boy when a Sister in Catholic grammar school asked him what he was “giving up” for Lent, he told her “cauliflower.” His wit annoyed her and she forced him to write out two hundred times, “I will not make fun of the holy season of Lent.”

Later as an adult, I knew a man who “gave up” beer for Lent, which would have been good for body and soul -- and his addiction -- only he drank whiskey instead! Like the candy and the cauliflower folks, he too missed the meaning of the Lenten thing.

Then there was abstaining from meat. In retrospect this too was good for us. No doubt, more fruit, fish and vegetables (we didn’t call them veggies then) were a much healthier diet. I just wonder, though, what Jesus would think. After all it was his forty days in the desert (Mt. 4:1) that’s the Lenten model. Remember he identified with the poor -- and poor families’ budgets mean hamburger helper not salmon steaks or shrimp bisque.

But enough of the Lenten craziness, fasting has its positive side and so does Lent. For many, though, Lent is more “giving” than “giving up.” It is more positive than negative. Moreover, “giving” is more constructive and more penitential. Just try volunteering as a Foster Grandparent instead of giving up television. You’ll soon see which is more demanding – and realize what is more important.

Instead of just “giving up” something for Lent, how about “giving” three days a week to work in a food pantry? What about systematically writing affirming notes or emails to those whose achievements are reported in the newspaper, or condolences to those who are grieving? How about visiting the sick or aged in hospitals, assisted living centers, or those housebound at home? Come to think of it, that sounds to me a lot like the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5).

After all Jesus did not stay in the desert. He was only there for forty days before his public ministry. He came out of the desert to console, to bless and heal. The Buddha too taught that we should come down from the mountaintop in order to perform acts of compassion for all sentient beings. Spirituality does not mean escape from society; it means plunging into it. It does not mean avoiding people; it means helping them with their needs.

The English word “Lent” originally meant springtime. It’s a time of rebirth and new life. It should be a time of awakening and recommitment – a time to change our life by changing our mind-set. I will say it again: changing our life is much more demanding than giving up a glass of wine at supper.

From time to time I have received criticisms from readers who want more political columns. Other readers prefer spiritual topics. Critics from both right and left would consider this Lenten column spiritual, but both would be wrong. The spiritual/political distinction is a false dichotomy – just as the sacred/secular distinction is. The problem with designating sacred days and seasons is that we are tempted to think that the rest of life is not as sacred. But it is.

The distinctions are too neat. There's nothing spiritual that is only spiritual and nothing political that is only political. Spirituality takes on flesh in the everyday -- in society. Some would say that volunteering for Meals on Wheels is spiritual. It certainly is, but it also has political implications.

Lent is a good time to emerge from the desert and use your talents for something "political." It's an appropriate time to come down from the mountain and throw yourself into the human struggle. Whatever the cause -- poverty, the environment, health care, peace -- make a Lenten commitment.

Don't just "give up" chocolate for lent. "Give" your time, talents and energy for other.

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**Jim Loney wrote the "*Litany of Resistance*" in 1991, during the first Gulf War. It has been translated into several languages, and is prayed regularly by Christian Peacemaker Teams and others, not only in response to world conflicts, but in response to threats of violence directed towards Christian Peacemaker Teams and the human rights defenders and civilian communities with whom they work.**

**It is available at** <http://www.cpt.org/publications/litanyofresistance.php>

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**Marc A. Thiessen, a "practicing Roman Catholic" and former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, is addressed in this article by Mark Oppenheimer. The article was forwarded by a reader, who did not mention where it first appeared. However, I believe that Mr. Oppenheimer writes for the *New York Times*.**

### **Defender of Waterboarding Hears From Critics**

There's nothing unusual about partisans of the Bush administration defending waterboarding as a useful form of "enhanced interrogation." Others will go even further, calling the technique "torture," but saying it may be a necessary evil. What is a bit unusual is the case being made by Marc A. Thiessen, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush.

In "Courting Disaster: How the C.I.A. Kept America Safe and How Barack Obama Is Inviting the Next Attack," Mr. Thiessen, a practicing Roman Catholic, says that waterboarding suspected terrorists was not only useful and desirable, but permitted by the teachings of the Catholic Church.

This does not square, to put it mildly, with the common understanding of Catholic teaching. In the past month, Catholic bloggers and writers from across the political spectrum have united to attack his views, and to defend their own: that waterboarding is torture, and that Roman Catholics are not supposed to do it.

Mr. Thiessen makes two basic arguments. First, he says that waterboarding, the simulated drowning technique used on Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the professed chief planner of the Sept. 11 attacks, and others, is not torture. "I didn't get into the Catholic theological stuff of it until I sat down to write the book," Mr. Thiessen said in a phone interview. So when Mr. Bush asked him, in 2006, to write a speech explaining the C.I.A.'s interrogation program, Mr. Thiessen asked himself other kinds of questions.

"There's a standard of torture in civil law," he said, "which is severe mental pain and suffering. I also have a common-sense definition, which is, 'If you're willing to try it, it's not torture.' "

Thousands of American soldiers have been willing to undergo waterboarding as part of their resistance training, Mr. Thiessen notes; therefore, it stands to reason that it is not torture.

Second, he invokes Catholic teaching to defend what he calls "coercive interrogation."

The catechism states, "the defense of the common good requires that an unjust aggressor be rendered unable to do harm," and Catholic tradition accepts that this might involve killing. And, Mr. Thiessen writes: "If this principle applies to taking human life, it must certainly apply to coercive interrogation as well. A captured terrorist is an unjust aggressor who retains the power to kill many thousands by withholding information about planned attacks."

To justify killing in self-defense, Catholics point to Thomas Aquinas's principle of double-effect: the intended effect is to save your own life; killing is the unintended effect. By the same logic, Mr. Thiessen argues, "the intent of the interrogator is not to cause harm to the detainee; rather, it is to render the aggressor unable to cause harm to society."

While Mr. Thiessen points out that the church does not forbid specific acts, his antagonists say the church's guidelines are hardly nebulous. The blogger [Andrew Sullivan](#) has [noted](#) that the catechism condemns "torture which uses physical or moral violence."

The philosopher Christopher O. Tollefsen, whose essay attacking Mr. Thiessen's views appeared Friday in the online magazine [Public Discourse](#), pointed in a phone interview to the 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. There, [Pope John Paul II](#) wrote that there are acts that "are always seriously wrong by reason of their object," including "whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit; whatever is offensive to human dignity."

The belief that waterboarding is morally or physically violent seems to unite all the writers who have criticized Mr. Thiessen, a group that includes the conservative blogger [Conor Friedersdorf](#); [Mark Shea](#), who edits the Web portal [Catholic](#)

Exchange; and Joe Carter, who blogs for *First Things*, a magazine popular with conservative Catholics.

“Thiessen has been vigorously criticized by both so-called liberal and so-called conservative Catholics,” said Paul Baumann, who edits the liberal lay-Catholic magazine *Commonweal*. “That is one good indication of how erroneous his view is. “ In “Courting Disaster,” Mr. Thiessen cites several thinkers to explain facets of his just-war interpretation. In interviews, two sounded skeptical of his position. Parts of Mr. Thiessen’s argument may have merit purely as a “philosophical theory,” said Darrell Cole, who teaches religion at Drew University. “But jumping to the conclusion that the C.I.A. was just in what it did is a tremendous leap in logic that I do not make.”

Jean Bethke Elshtain, of the University of Chicago, said that while soldiers or politicians might have to commit necessary evils sometimes, they “still stand convicted before God, if you are thinking theologically.”

“The necessary evil means precisely that: it is both ‘necessary’ and ‘evil,’ ” she said. “So the worst thing that can happen is to make something like waterboarding legally acceptable.”

When asked if any Catholic theologians agreed with him, Mr. Thiessen named the Rev. Brian W. Harrison, (although “there are others who haven’t necessarily been outspoken on it”).

By phone, Father Harrison cautioned that, “you can’t do evil that good may come — that is an intrinsic principle of Catholic doctrine.” But, he said, he was persuaded by Mr. Thiessen’s book that “at least so far, there is nothing that the Catholic magisterium has said that would condemn waterboarding as such.”

But what if the church specifically prohibited waterboarding?

“On what competence would they do that?” Mr. Thiessen said. “I don’t think the church would be competent to judge whether the way we did it was torture.” “Perhaps,” he added, “they should clarify it. We were in the middle of a war, and there was no teaching on that. But the church only gives general moral guidance, and people of good faith have to interpret that guidance.”

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**The “Beliefs” column appears every other week in *The Spokesman-Review*, Spokane, WA.**

### **Catholic church in flux**

By Tom Westbrook

More than the Roman Catholic Church was moved by that nontriumphalist renovation rendered nearly a half century ago.

Much good has evolved from that Second Vatican Council of shakers and movers. The gathering initiated a wondrous transition of the church. Its image as a block-solid monolith was transformed.

We were shown to be not so much an “it” as an “us.” Many got the heartening message: “We are the church!” For the wearied and jaded “hangers on,” it came as quite unexpected but truly joyous news.

Not all applauded. Though the ideas and interpretations advanced by the rare assembly were well-researched and a long time in incubation, they met with reserve and rejection stemming from those unprepared for the amazing outpouring. It seemed a foolish debasement to some. It was even labeled a manifest threat by people who called themselves “traditionalists.”

Controversy erupted. Catholics took on strong and wrongly named sides, referring to themselves and each other as liberals and conservatives. All invoked precedent. Contentious exchanges continue unabated.

Vatican II invited us to see ourselves as “people of God.” Even so, given our nature and numbers, we must recognize that our church constitutes a polity that requires governance.

As members, we owe allegiance to our leadership. We are rightly expected to be supportive of the Pope and his retinue, but must also stand ready to rebut and refuse Caesarlike demands emanating from his echelons.

Writing as a long-lived, loyal layman, I’m quite aware of the traditions and justifications claimed by and for the institutional entity of our Christ-initiated, Spirit-guided faith community.

I truly treasure the church, its mission and its gifts. I try to recognize and accept the human element of the institution as a corollary consequence of our incarnational origin.

Whatever its cause or explanations, I don’t feel compelled to accept, let alone endorse, the all-or-nothing demands and compliance impositions set by various hyperprotective, organizational bureaucrats. Regardless of their sincerity of motive, these controllers can’t be allowed to triumph over anyone’s responsibly formed conscience.

Our institutional church has an established pattern of making gradualist responses to emerging needs. The resultant delays often engender needless frustrations. Our hierarchs too often appear as status-clinging denizens of an upper room. So, is there a problem? More than one! Many are growing. Tensions abound. We of the Spokane Diocese will soon be greatly affected by the word we’ll receive from a Vatican spokesman. We’ll be informed that empowered officials in Rome have secured needed papal approval of their choice for our next bishop. Their man might prove to be compassionate, even holy. We hope for that. But recent appointments have hardly been stellar.

It's not unlikely that we'll be sent a "company man" who will focus on wielding power and control. Unfortunately, since the era of Pope John XXIII and Paul VI, we've felt little "bubbling up."

Church life has sadly reverted to the enervating process of "trickling down." The Vatican has in recent decades been dispatching reactive hierarchs to take charge of what it views as its recalcitrant wards.

The world's too easily distracted media has heralded John Paul, the recent hard-charging Polish pontiff, for his zesty political undertakings. Most have overlooked that doubt-free dominator's stifling of Vatican II.

Obstreperous Catholics such as myself who first witnessed and gloried in the overdue breakthrough of Vatican II have buoyantly called for the ordination of women as priests and bishops. We are ready for these changes and more.

Retrogressive repressions are now heavily burdening those of us who won't give up the hope or the faith. We know our need to seek God's forbearance and guidance in channeling our increasing impatience.

We're called to act with love, yet we're terribly tempted to be less than gentle in our remonstrations with the clerical keepers of the ecclesial club. We are wondering: "What would Jesus have us do?"

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**The final article is a book review by Thomas Fox, the editor of the *National Catholic Reporter*.**

### **A life of change and renewal**

Years from now, when historians look back to better understand the mindsets of U.S. women religious who lived through the Second Vatican Council and its aftermath, they would be well advised to read *What Was There for Me Once*, a memoir by Servant of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Margaret Brennan.

With a vantage of 65 years as a woman religious, she looks back and in an unassuming manner tells the story of her love affair with religious life during a period of monumental change. Brennan embraced this change, at times being called upon to manage and direct it, causing her bursts of excitement and reexamination, along with disappointment and a tinge of sadness, perhaps for dreams that never quite came to be.

Introducing her work by evoking the imagery of playwright Lillian Hellman, Brennan depicts her life as a layered landscape, a portrait yet to be completed. "Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: A tree will show through a woman's dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea. That is called *pentimento* because the painter 'repented,' changed his mind.

Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by the later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again.”

The layers, presented as chapter headings, take the reader on a journey with the author through the second half of the 20th century as her outlook on life evolves, catalyzed by feminist spirituality and theology, and a growing Christian desire, rooted in fresh Gospel understandings, to get involved in building a more just and peaceful world. While in so many ways, Brennan’s experiences were unique, she was also a religious everywoman and for this reason her clean and simple writing will resonate widely.

The first part of Brennan’s memoir deals with her early childhood, growing up in a loving Irish-American family “in which the traditional faith was vibrant and strong” and her parents encouraging. That upbringing led Brennan to decide to enter religious life as it had been lived “largely unaltered for centuries before.”

This preconiliar church experience was fulfilling and made sense to her -- and she embraced it. Of religious life as it approached Vatican II, she writes: “While I was entirely happy in the traditional model of religious life as it had been lived for hundreds of years, I was open to the coming changes.”

The Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary were among those religious who were quick to internalize the Vatican documents and the new theologians appearing on the scene. “To use the framework of [Jesuit theologian] Bernard Lonergan, I would say that for me the change from the traditional model of religious life to the Vatican II model was a process of conversion. It involved a real change in worldview, in horizon.”

In a Vatican II insight that was to have ramifications for Brennan and countless other women religious to this very day, Brennan writes: “Our sense of how the Holy Spirit moved in our communities was reversed. The charism of a religious congregation was given to the founder for the church, not from the church to the founder [emphasis hers]. ... We began to see ourselves as ourselves -- women in the church empowered by our own Spirit-given charisms and called by God to minister with our brother priests as collaborators in the great work of evangelization.”

It was during this period of change that Brennan was elected general superior of the Monroe, Mich., Immaculate Heart of Mary congregation. According to the order’s constitutions at the time, each woman was expected to approach Brennan, kneel before her, and kiss her hand as a mark of respect and obedience. “I knew instantly and instinctively that this was not what I needed from these women who had entrusted me with leadership. And so I made my first change as general superior and asked them to give me what I most longed for and needed -- a kiss of peace.” Brennan was fortunate that her community rested within the archdiocese of Cardinal John Dearden of Detroit, who had been a member of the commission that drafted Vatican II’s “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.” Dearden was a strong advocate of renewal in the years that followed the council.

When I spoke to Brennan recently, she recalled a piece of advice Dearden offered her: "He said, 'I ask you one thing. Do not ask me any questions.'" Those words allowed and encouraged Brennan to lead her community as the Spirit inspired her -- and she said she remains grateful to the late cardinal to this day.

Brennan's own spiritual renewal was founded upon three pillars: the house of prayer movement, Ignatian thought, and the entrance of sisters into deeper theological education. During those years the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, under Brennan's leadership, personally encountered the likes of Br. David Steindl-Rast and Thomas Merton. Spiritual thought seemed volcanic at the time. Brennan describes it as seeing -- and seeing again.

"A dream began to take shape in my mind. What if we had one theologian for every hundred sisters in the congregation? Perhaps then, I thought, we would be able to discuss matters as equals." So she decided to send 10 sisters to pursue studies in various fields of theology.

She describes the decade of the 1970s as one of "global outreach" for the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters, who were setting up new missions in Asia, Africa and Latin America. With those fresh contacts with the poor and marginalized came an inevitable social and political radicalization. The missions of women religious never seemed to be more grounded.

It was also a time when religious congregations began to feel church disapproval over how they were implementing council recommendations. Some congregations lost their status as canonical institutions. Tensions between the institutional church, fastened to the status quo, and religious, advocates of the marginalized, were beginning to become pronounced. These tensions, of course, would ebb and flow for decades.

In that atmosphere, Dom Helder Camara, the dynamic Brazilian bishop, spoke in 1973 at the annual gathering of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, with Brennan at the group's helm. The "red bishop" called upon the women to become "Abrahamic minorities" -- persons "determined to fight in a peace-filled, yet valid way for the formation of a more just and human world."

Those were "messy" and difficult years, Brennan writes. She watched many women leave her religious community and this caused her to rethink her ideas about religious vocations. Once she thought a vocation was irrevocable; it was a lifelong matter. Now she was thinking vocations had several dimensions. "Whether they were younger or older, many of these women who were leaving religious life had realized that they were called not to consecrated life as a religious, but to work as laypersons in the church. Exactly what is the call of religious today is something that needs a great deal of our prayer and reflection."

The next phase of Brennan's life involved time in Toronto, teaching for 25 years at the Jesuit-run Regis College there. These were more private years. They continued to nourish spiritual growth, and she encountered more feminist thought. She writes that she didn't seek out a female deity to replace a male deity, but rather feminist

thinking allowed her to “recover, reclaim and rename the God who is not any one person or any one thing, but is the source and the reality of all persons and all things.”

Creation spirituality, including the works of Passionist Fr. Thomas Berry, also molded her thinking. And in a yearlong sabbatical in Boston in 1984, she encountered Jungian thought and continued to let go of old notions of God, “images that were anchored in my mind but that no longer spoke to my heart. É Letting go is something that happens organically as old images are healed and transformed, and fresh ones slowly take shape out of new awareness, perception and experience.”

Sensing “it was time,” in 2001, Brennan left Toronto at age 77 to return to Michigan. Ending her teaching career was another time of “letting go.”

The idea of letting go, of emptying, was by then more than an old habit; it was another way of seeking God, seed for another insight to the divine. “To be able to let go of how and what and where the church, my religious congregation and I should be is an almost daily preoccupation that I can easily mistake for zeal,” she writes. Brennan’s words reflect a tranquility that seems to emerge from a recognition she is not in control, that she has shed what she needed to shed, and faith moves her forward. As for religious life, Brennan likes to cite the thinking of two women religious she holds in her heart with special admiration: Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister and Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders. Each of these women holds that religious life is primarily a call to reclaim a way of life organized to pursue the human quest for God. “To keep the question of God -- and God’s questions -- high on the horizon of the world is worth the gifts of our lives,” Brennan says. And, without a doubt, her memoir attests to this purpose.

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**Your comments and articles are appreciated. Please forward them to [tony@tonyercolano.com](mailto:tony@tonyercolano.com)**