

## THE FLORILEGIA EXCHANGE

Hello, I'm Gil Bailie president of the Cornerstone Forum. The Forum's executive director Randy Coleman-Riese and I would like to invite you to be part of a special project we are launching for the purpose of staying in touch with our old friends, monthly supporters and major contributors during the upcoming months when I will sharply curtail my traveling and speaking activities and devote myself to a long-postponed writing project.

There are several reasons for the timing of the writing project. One is the silver lining of the economic downturn – since it is no longer economically feasible for me to maintain so demanding a lecturing schedule – now seems the time to do what I have promised to do and many have long urged me to do, namely, to put some of those many thousands of spoken words that we have sent into the world in the form of cassette tapes, CDs and internet audio files on paper and into a book. My job in the months ahead is to figure out which ones.

As grateful as we are for the silver lining, however, the economic cloud it rims casts a shadow yet. For much of the financial support the Forum has received in recent years has been in response to the traveling and lecturing which are now being set aside in the interests of the writing project. So the challenge we face is that of being useful enough to our friends and supporters to be worthy of their continued prayers and support. Thus arose the idea of creating a website to which only our closest friends and donors would have access, and to use it to share excerpts from the manuscript-in-progress. Depending on the preference of those with access to this website, the excerpts may be posted in both a textual and an audio format.

Whether one is probing the Christian mystery and wrestling with its paradoxical implications at the podium or at the keyboard, however, to speak of Christian matters in a Christian voice is necessarily to be in conversation with others, and many of those we are inviting to look over my shoulder or listen in as the manuscript takes shape are people with whom I have been in conversation – literally or imaginatively – for many years. Even when at the writing desk, it is the faces and voices of these dialogue partners that I will have in my mind and heart. The website Randy has created will give this interior dialogue a social reality that will be a great source of inspiration to me. I can only hope that our friends and supporters will find it useful as well.

Our very oldest friends will recognize the name we have given to this project, which is: *The Florilegia Exchange*. For what is now the Cornerstone Forum was for many years the Florilegia Institute. The term was set aside in favor of our current name in part because the word *florilegia* was unfamiliar to most people. So allow me to say something about the title of the new project before describing the project itself.

*Florilegium* is a Latin word literally meaning a collection of flowers, an exact synonym of the Greek *anthologia*, from which we derive our word anthology. Like the Greek term, the Latin *florilegium* came to mean simply a collection of texts, usually literary texts. I chose the plural – *florilegia* – many years ago for the rather idiosyncratic teaching I was

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doing at the time. My predilection for quoting literary, scriptural, and theological texts – a predilection that continues to this day – was fully in evidence in those early years, and *florilegia* seemed an apt name for what I was doing, albeit one that required some explanation then just as it does now.

The term is perhaps even more appropriate to the nature of the new project, for we will be sharing with our special friends and donors excerpts from whatever portion of the manuscript-in-progress I might be working on at the time. The overall result will quite literally be a florilegium – an anthology – of randomly selected excerpts from the work-in-progress.

Since books have a way of taking their authors in unforeseen directions, all I can say about the writing project at this point is that the current working title is “Easter in the Meantime.” To compensate for the likelihood that the double meaning of the word *meantime* in the title will go unnoticed, the working subtitle is “Faith in the Crossfire.” For the challenge the book will address is that of proclaiming an Easter faith in a world growing increasingly hostile to public manifestations of Christianity, and especially to the moral principles it inspires and the theological convictions and anthropological realism upon which these principles are based.

I expect it to be a sobering book, especially for those who have been encouraged by the spirit of the age to look for hope in all the wrong places. But, as an alternative to those evanescent hopes, it will propose Christian hope, which is, ultimately, the only source of hope sustainable in the face of personal and cosmic mortality, for it alone is born of the utterly unique Easter event.

The working title of the book – Easter in the Meantime – brought to mind, therefore, a few of the lines from Wendell Berry’s poem, *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*:

Be joyful  
though you have considered all the facts. ...

Be like the fox  
who makes more tracks than necessary,  
some in the wrong direction.  
Practice resurrection.

If Christians implicitly acknowledge that the Resurrection takes practice by speaking of practicing the faith, and if we enter most profoundly into that practice in the Eucharistic liturgy – the responsibility for proclaiming an Easter Faith in the “meantime” will require a few forays into uncharted and hostile territory, some of which may turn out in retrospect to have been in the wrong direction. I hope, nevertheless – perhaps thanks to your feedback – to rectify any such missteps prior to publication. In general, however, I

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will be sharing only those passages from the manuscript which I believe to be worthy of our time and attention.

This decision to turn from the delights of addressing audiences in person to the more solitary task of writing is one I have postponed for so long that my friends can be forgiven for expecting that books will come dropping like ripe fruit from trees weighed down with years of lecture notes and occasional published articles. Alas, this isn't likely to be the case. This is so not just because of my modest gifts or my fastidiousness as a writer, but because for me writing for serious publication – as distinct, say, from blogging – involves the harmonization of the messenger and the message, and when the message is as momentous as the one I think it is time to deliver, the literary task of crafting its language is considerably compounded by the spiritual task of becoming a person worthy of delivering it. “The assurance of faith,” writes Jean Daniélou, “comes, not so much from the nature of the evidence as from the quality of the witness.” Even granting that a considerable gap will remain between the final manuscript and the worthiness of the author who sends it on its way into the world, the task of narrowing that gap will very likely slow the production of the final text. I say this, not as an excuse, but rather by way of asking my friends for both your patience and your prayers.

We very much hope, not only that you will find *The Florilegia Exchange* useful enough to merit your continued prayers and support, but that you will at least occasionally favor us with an email or phone call, making suggestions, posing questions, and sharing your thoughts. Since I would like to include in the book some contemporary illustrations of the cultural challenges we face, and since I will have limited time to peruse the daily news, I would be especially grateful to you if you would email me with links to news items, articles or stories which you think exemplify some aspect of the contemporary crisis.

Email me at: [gil@cornerstone-forum.org](mailto:gil@cornerstone-forum.org)

Or call toll-free and leave a voice message at: 866-506-5451

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Drawing on the extraordinary anthropological insights of René Girard, the book will be an attempt to give a vigorous defense of Christianity's universal truth claims and to do so fully cognizant of the powerful forces now arrayed against any form of Christianity that refuses to mimic the passing moral and social fashions of the age. The list of such forces is legion, but it prominently includes the sexual revolution, its manifold and calamitous social consequences, and its morally ludicrous philosophical underpinnings – one of which is the celebration of radical autonomy, according to which an act achieves its moral stature from the fact that it is freely chosen rather than from the nature of the act itself.

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Added to these and other disturbing trends within Western society is the growing determination of radical Islam to achieve its centuries old goal of conquering the West, a goal that the sharia jihadists have reason to believe may finally be achievable, not by the conquering armies that failed in the past, but by an ineluctable process of demographic and cultural Islamization, with only an occasional unruly protest, riot or threat of violence to intimidate recalcitrant infidels and accelerate the process. To each of these assaults on the cultural foundations of Western civilization a generous helping of what Teilhard de Chardin called “the diplomacy of candor” is in order.

For the sake of those unfamiliar with the work of the Cornerstone Forum, let me conclude by trying to situate both the writing project and the new website where our friends and donors can read or listen to portions of the manuscript-in-progress against the backdrop of the Cornerstone Forum’s overarching mission of bringing Christianity’s incomparable resources to bear on a culture that seems hell-bent on proving – precisely by dispensing with these resources – just how indispensable they are to the health of our civilization.

Perhaps the place to begin is with the scriptural source of the Forum’s current name, which of course is: “The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone.” That verse refers, not just to something that happened 2000 years ago, but to an ongoing struggle between the cultural structures of sacred violence and the social and psychological reflexes commensurate with them, on one hand, and, on the other hand, the truth about the human predicament that broke in on the world at the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. Christ’s torture and death serve as stark reminders of how determined fallen humanity will always be to rid itself of this truth.

Though promising counter-trends can be found, today one sees abundant evidence of this worldly aversion to the Christian revelation. While few Christians in our corner of the world suffer martyrdom and overt persecution, many elsewhere do. And even we live in what may be the twilight years of a unique historical epoch during which these cruder forms of worldly hostility have been in abeyance. Whether this historically exceptional interlude of relative tolerance will last for a while longer or come to an abrupt end remains to be seen. But there is little doubt that our civilization has lately been growing indifferent – if not overtly hostile – toward the religious tradition that inspired its greatest cultural and moral achievements – namely: the respect for the dignity of each and every person, an empathy for the persecuted, the downtrodden, the poor and the powerless, and – most importantly – the religious inculcation of these moral principles in human hearts and their political codification in law, which is essentially what we mean when we use the phrase “Western Civilization.”

Everywhere one looks today, however, one sees the tradition that fostered these principles mocked or parodied. Even where those principles remain too culturally embedded to be openly repudiated, they are often rhetorically invoked even as they are

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being effectively inverted. Efforts are afoot to replace the moral realism of the Judeo-Christian tradition with a patchwork of momentarily fashionable and anthropologically preposterous social theories, which if given legal sanction will unquestionably lead to the loss of personal dignity, the erosion of societal cohesion, and continued moral decline. The validity of this prognosis is nowhere more chillingly confirmed than in how quickly many came to accept as morally licit the pseudo-surgical killing of millions of children each year in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's bestowal of legal legitimacy on that abominable practice in the *Roe v. Wade* case.

The legalization of what was theretofore universally regarded as an unspeakable crime in the Christian West is the most morally grotesque of the ideological offspring of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. To win broader acquiescence, each of these inversions of traditional principle has been sugarcoated as a campaign to protect victims. Thus characterized, they neutralize or paralyze the moral misgivings of those in whom Christianity had awakened a solicitude for victims so paramount that the very claim to be protecting victims blinded many to the massive slaughter of victims that was occurring under its auspices.

Of course, this moral revolution predates the 1960s, just as it has a seemingly more respectable rationale. The twin philosophical pillars on which today's assault on cultural tradition depends are relativism and multiculturalism, each of which must be vigorously challenged if our civilization is to endure.

Multiculturalism is one of those ideological doctrines that could only survive in the climate-controlled hothouse of academia. It declares – not on the basis of evidence, but by fiat – that all cultures are morally, scientifically, materially, and socially equal. Not only is the idea absurd on the face of it, but it is so obviously unique to Western culture as to be charmingly self-annihilating. It is currently dying an ignominious death. But it has done great damage and its influence lingers.

Contrary to the multiculturalism, culture matters. It plays an enormous role in shaping and determining how we experience reality and how we interpret it. No one at all familiar with René Girard's analysis of mimetic desire, for example, could doubt the enormous role played in cultural life by what we typically call role models, that is: figures in whom a person or a society is encouraged to recognize the living embodiment of its transcendent truths and highest ideals.

A culture, for instance, predominantly influenced by a Man of peace who preached the Sermon on the Mount and died praying forgiveness on his persecutors – its countless shortcomings notwithstanding – is infinitely preferable to one whose ideal figure was an unflinching warlord who conquered by the sword and ruled by force or, for that matter, by a man of dispassionate introspection who strove to avoid suffering and regarded the world as an illusion.

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Obviously, cultures come and go however, and Christianity – like the Son of Man who had no place to lay His head – is not completely at home in any of them. But we who – through no merit of our own – have had the extraordinary privilege of living in a Christ-haunted culture must not take our cultural blessings for granted, nor neglect the task of preserving the religious and moral influence without which these blessings will vanish, leaving our children and their children to wander in a social landscape desolate in comparison to the one we have enjoyed.

Meeting our responsibilities in this regard will necessarily plunge us into the contemporary culture wars. Bemoaning these conflicts is easy enough, but they are about fundamentally important matters. A very great deal depends on how they are resolved, and to remain neutral is to take a stand in favor of the post-Christian, post-modern worldview now entrenching itself in the command centers of both political power and popular culture.

That said, however, the primary purpose of the Cornerstone Forum – and of the book I hope to write and the portions of the manuscript-in-progress we plan to share with our friends and supporters – is to substantiate a more important claim: namely that Christianity – fulfilling the promise of its Jewish antecedents – reveals the truth about the human condition. And this claim – its considerable historical, theological and philosophical justifications notwithstanding – is ultimately an anthropological one. Culture works and is conducive to human flourishing precisely to the degree that its presuppositions about the nature and meaning of the human person and the social relationships in which the person is necessarily embedded are valid. Christianity's claim to universality stands or falls on that issue.

The book and the excerpts from it we will be sharing with our supporters will take an anthropological approach, therefore, because our situation demands it. For no amount of political, economic or moral analysis will reveal the depth of the cultural crisis now engulfing us. Our predicament can only be understood anthropologically, and, as René Girard has so convincingly demonstrated, the mother-lode of anthropological intelligence is the Bible, and especially the Christian New Testament.

Only by recognizing the decisive impact the Christian revelation has had on history and culture – and the transfiguring effect Christian faith has had on human subjectivity – can we assess the current crisis, while awakening a hope capable of surviving the world-historical convolutions that loom on the horizon. Without that hope, the absurdly romantic utopias conjured up to replace it will dissolve – as so many already have – into despair and nihilism.

The task before us is unquestionably daunting. Resignation in the face of it is the first temptation to be avoided. It is essential, therefore, to remember that Christianity spread through the ancient world because it awakened hope in those resigned to pagan despair and engulfed in crises analogous to our own. As the revelation of the Cross began

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freeing humanity from the seductive power of sacred violence and the myths and rituals that perpetuated it, the Resurrection bathed the world in a light which the darkness of historical calamity and persecution could not extinguish. At the very moment when civil order seemed to be dissolving, and the barbarians were closing in on its besieged outposts, Christians bore witness to a hope unlike anything the surrounding pagan world had ever known. Today, under similar circumstances, it will fall again to Christianity to inspire a hope capable of filling the vacuum left by the collapse of modernity's naïve optimism, on the one hand, and the thinly disguised despair and cynicism of postmodernity, on the other.

More years ago than I care to remember I wrote a book entitled: "Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads." Who can possibly doubt that we stand now at a more perilous crossroads than the one I tried to describe in that book. So perilous, in fact, that we cannot possibly avoid cataclysmic disaster on the strength of our own efforts alone, however vigorous and selfless they may be. Whatever the future holds for good or ill, I haven't the least doubt that it will confirm the validity of Jesus' astonishing statement in John's Gospel: "Without me you can do nothing." The rising tide of nihilism in our increasingly post-Christian world today is confirmation of that statement, as are the mustard seeds of hope and joy that are quietly taking root and beginning to grow.

Each of us is just such a mustard seed, and we are called by name to some mission only we can perform. As you work to accomplish the mission you have been given, I hope you will continue to value the work that Randy Coleman-Riese and I are doing at the Cornerstone Forum.

For our part, we will continue to value your friendship and be grateful to you for your prayers and support.

I'm Gil Bailie for the Cornerstone Forum