

The Scriptorium

A New Project of the Cornerstone Forum

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.

Every cloud has a silver lining, as thirty years of this apostolate have demonstrated time and again, and the silver lining in the economic downturn from which we all now suffer is that, since it is no longer economically feasible for me to maintain the demanding lecturing schedule of the last few years, 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 decide which ones.

As grateful as we are for the silver lining, however, the economic cloud at its center casts a dark 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 expressing our gratitude to our donors by creating a website exclusively for those who support our work financially, and to use this website to share excerpts from the manuscript-in-progress, to solicit any comments or questions our friends might have concerning these texts, and for Randy and I to discuss all these things in split-screen video conversations posted regularly to the new website. The plan at the moment is to publish excerpts from the work-in-progress in both a print and an audio format. We are calling this new project "The Scriptorium."

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 continuity with centuries of tradition and in conversation with one's contemporaries, 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. Happily, the website Randy has created will give this interior dialogue a social reality that will be a great source of inspiration for me. I can only hope that our friends and supporters will find it useful as well.

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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 trained 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 the Eucharist is where we “practice resurrection” by allowing ourselves to be assimilated to the self-sacrificial drama of Trinitarian Life, the task of proclaiming the Easter Faith into which the Eucharist draws us necessarily requires forays into historically uncharted and culturally contested territory, forays which, in retrospect, may occasionally prove to have been in the wrong direction. Running such risks with relative impunity, however, is one of the luxuries of a privately circulated working draft, whose shortcomings an author can reasonably hope – thanks perhaps to the feedback of his friends – to rectify prior to publication. Needless to say, however, I will make an effort to share only those passages of the manuscript which I believe to be worthy of your time and attention. Which of the excerpts that we post on the new website might eventually end up between the covers of a book, and how altered from the circulated draft they might become, I cannot predict. What I can say, however, is that the excerpts we post will appear in no particular order, for I do not want to slow the writing project at this point with what would likely be a lengthy process of arranging themes in a

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publishable sequence. Rather, I will take up themes in whatever order the Spirit moves me to do so or contemporary cultural developments make especially topical.

The 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 branches 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 of 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 as a way of asking my friends for both patience and prayers.

We very much hope, not only that you will find the new website 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 cultural crisis.

Email me at: 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 conflation of freedom with radical autonomy, according to which an act acquires its moral stature neither from the nature of the act itself nor because it conforms to philosophical, anthropological or moral reality – but simply because it is the product of a will sufficiently unfettered to imagine itself free.

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Added to this 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 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 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. This cornerstone is at the same time a stumbling stone, and 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 very powerful forces in our society have lately been growing indifferent – if not overtly hostile – toward the religious tradition that inspired our civilization’s 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.”

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Everywhere one looks today, however, one sees the tradition that fostered these principles mocked or parodied. Even where those principles remain too culturally venerable to be openly repudiated, they are often rhetorically invoked even as they are 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 the history of 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 misbegotten 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 appeals, when necessary, to seemingly more respectable justifications. The twin philosophical pillars on which today's assault on cultural tradition depends are relativism and multiculturalism. Each is as anthropologically fatuous as it is philosophically sophomoric, and each must be vigorously repudiated if our civilization is to endure.

Multiculturalism is one of those ideological orchids 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 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 influence in cultural life of 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.

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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 shortcoming notwithstanding – is infinitely preferable to one whose ideal figure was an unflinching warlord who conquered by the sword, ruled by force and reveled in the slaughter of his enemies; or, for that matter, by a man of dispassionate introspection who strove to avoid suffering and regarded the world as an illusion.

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 dreary and 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

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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 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 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."

Its political and material accomplishments notwithstanding, the European Enlightenment gradually devolved into the *de facto* rejection of any such link between the West's Christian roots and its cultural prospects. In due course, however, not even its cornucopia of material blessings could prevent the rising tide of nihilism that has accompanied the de-Christianization of the West. If this nihilism correlates with Jesus' warning about the spiritual impotence into which a once Christian civilization can be expected to descend without Christ, the mustard seeds of serious Christian commitment that are taking root and spouting up among the increasingly rank weeds of irreligious secularism are a vivid reminder of what faith in Christ can accomplish against all worldly odds.

Each of us is just such a mustard seed, and in this critical hour of our common life together each of us is 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.

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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.