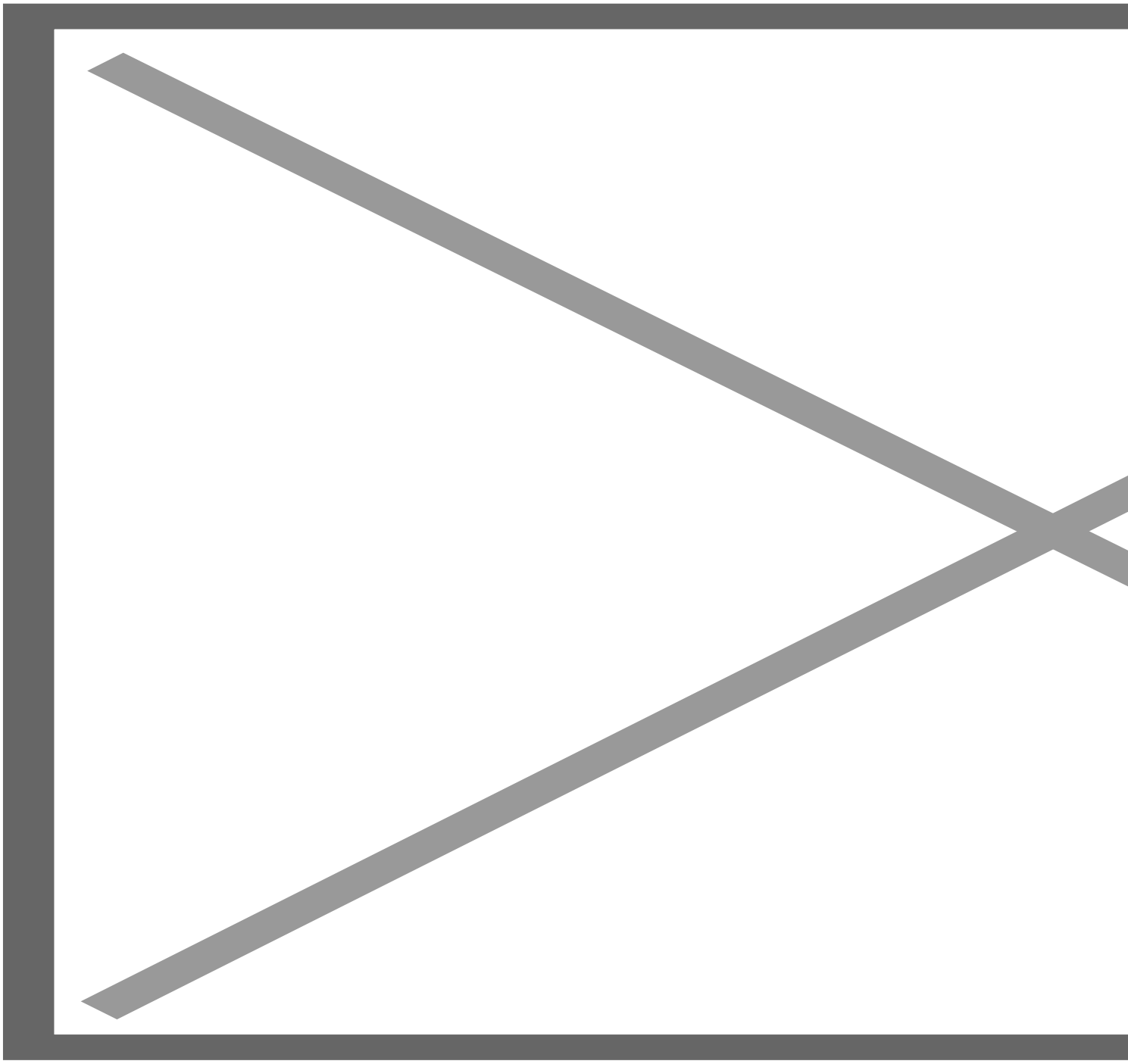
I had to learn to love the church

Then I had to learn to love God.

by William T. Cavanaugh in the June 16, 2021 issue



(Illustration by Tim Cook)

During times of turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it's tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one's mind or heart can be difficult work. With this in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939, in which we ask leading thinkers to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic, "How my mind has changed." This essay is the tenth in the new series.

I must have been in high school when my sister and I took advantage of a short absence of parental supervision to collect and throw away some devotional objects displayed in our house: cheap plastic Madonna-and-childs; plaques of saints; strange, bullet-shaped containers with St. Joseph inside, holding a jug in one hand and what looked like an oversized hamburger patty in the other. These items had come into the house either as prizes my four siblings and I won at St. Patrick's grade school or as gifts from my aunt, a School Sister of St. Francis, now deceased, who was and is one of my favorite people in the whole world.

My mother returned from the store and found my sister and me suspiciously lurking around the trash can in the garage. Nevertheless, our culling of the herd was hardly noticed; there were enough devotional trinkets on every surface in the house that a few blessing the garbage can made little difference.

This episode represents for me the intersection of two worlds, immigrant Catholicism and suburbia. My mom came from a German Catholic farm family in western Wisconsin. Her father was born in Wisconsin, but his baptismal certificate is in German. My mom's family left Germany in the wake of Bismarck's Kulturkampf, his war against the Catholic Church. My dad was born in Chicago to a blue-collar Irish father and Polish mother. Both of my parents were a couple of generations removed from the old country, but they met in Chicago, where each was steeped in the ethnic Catholicism that marked the city, each parish identified with its own nationality and functioning as the heart of a community's social life.

A Catholic of that generation was born in a Catholic hospital, was baptized and received weekly sacraments in a Catholic church, was educated in Catholic schools, attended bingo and smokers at the Catholic parish on weekends, and was buried in a Catholic cemetery. There were Catholic unions and credit unions and professional societies. All of that began to change in the mid-20th century, as Catholics moved to the suburbs. No one on either side of my family went to college until my generation, but my father made enough working for an insurance company after World War II to buy a diminutive house in suburbia.

I was raised there in a church still running on the fumes of immigrant culture. But immigrant Catholic culture was in the process of being replaced by a different kind of kitsch. In the wake of Vatican II, the big bloody crucifix behind the altar at our parish church was replaced by a happy Jesus floating in the center of a sunburst. "O Sacred Head Surrounded" gave way to the Beatles' "Let It Be" at school mass. My mom grew up butchering hogs and storing hams in the grain bin, but she bought us Tang and Space Food Sticks. I learned about some saints at school, but at home I watched *Gilligan's Island*. The Sacred Heart my grandfather had painted—a grisly piece of organ meat, garnished with a crown of thorns, blood dripping from where the arrow entered and exited, topped off with leaping flames—just didn't fit the zeitgeist. Moreover, it gave me the creeps. I don't remember throwing it out, but I can no longer find it.

Growing up, my experience of Catholicism was benign, with no dictatorial nuns or predatory priests. I imbibed a general sense that the universe was not meaningless, that there was a God who would somehow get around to rectifying things, either in this life or the next. I have never seriously doubted that God is real and present; when I was a boy, this mostly meant as a rewarder of good and a punisher of bad. Good would get the better of bad in the end, but when I sang the psalm "The LORD is kind and merciful" I often thought that "The LORD is kind of merciful" would be a better rendition.

At some level, however, I think I sensed that my Catholicism was too benign, that I was a generation removed from the really peculiar and gothic stuff that made Catholics stand out in America. I didn't necessarily want to do a novena—who's got the time with so much *Beverly Hillbillies* to watch?—but I wanted at least some Catholic vocabulary: aspergillum, sodality, extreme unction, titular see. What I wanted was an identity in a suburban context that was rapidly melting everything solid into thin air. My parents grew up in real places; I grew up where cornfields were paved to make room for the retro McDonald's made to look like it was from the 1950s, which stood next to the medieval castle–themed restaurant, which was next to a Long John Silver's full of pirate-y paraphernalia. Amid the superficiality, maybe Catholicism was a door to something deeper.

I went to college at Notre Dame, which, someone once quipped, is of the world but not in it. What I think that means is that, despite its shameless attempts to ensconce its graduates in the upper echelons of American society, Notre Dame cannot shake its peculiar Catholic identity which is finally indigestible to mainstream America. I found that indigestibility appealing, and I switched from chemical engineering to theology as my major course of study.

In a course for majors I first encountered Stanley Hauerwas, a Methodist theologian who, as I've written before, felt about Catholics the way that Jane Goodall felt about chimpanzees. The course was "Christian Ethics in America," which began with Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel in the late 19th century. The church was going to change America, but the story Hauerwas told in the 1980s was how America had instead changed the church. To change America, Christians thought they needed to gain economic and social and political power, but the pursuit of such power made them assimilate to America, and the Sermon on the Mount got left to a few prophetic cranks.

Hauerwas's affection for Catholics stemmed from the fact that they were late to assimilate and still held onto some remnants of practices—sacraments, saints, religious orders, a transnational Petrine ministry, to give a few examples—that might resist absorption by the national gods of state and market. He asked, "What difference does it make to be a Christian?" and he sketched out some answers, starting with Jesus' nonviolent solidarity with people on the margins of society. At the heart of Hauerwas's vision was the church, a community of disciples of Jesus whose fundamental loyalty was to God, not Caesar or Mammon. The church had to live as a distinct community of visibly different practices in order for the world to see what it was not and be converted to the kingdom of God.

I spent a few years after college looking for this church that Hauerwas was talking about. After living in an intentional Catholic volunteer community in Colorado and getting a master's in theology at Cambridge, I went to Chile to work in a poor area of Santiago as a lay associate with the Holy Cross order. In the 1980s, Latin America was where the action was, where the church was most relevant and alive. A significant portion of the church in Latin America—still overwhelmingly Catholic—was organizing in base communities of poor people and resisting the pro-capitalist military regimes that were brutalizing the poor majorities in many Latin American countries.

In Chile, the Pinochet regime was attempting, with the aid of University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman and his disciples, to reduce society to a collection of individuals, with no unions, parties, or other organizations standing between the individual on the one hand and the authoritarian state and business corporations on the other. The church became the only place where people at the grassroots could organize, and the Catholic Church sponsored and gave what protection it could to base communities, soup kitchens, buying cooperatives, human rights advocacy, workshops for the unemployed, groups of families of political prisoners, and more. The church fostered alternative spaces to the state and market, and it became the center of protest against the military regime—the most significant institutional thorn in the regime's side.

I helped run a church-sponsored cooperative building project in a shantytown and participated in the protests. My short stay in Chile—a little over two years—had a profound effect on me in many ways. Most important were friendships with people Pope Francis has identified as the "throwaways" of the global economic system. In terms of more intellectual formation, I began to see in the flesh possibilities for the church as an alternative to an exploitative and exclusionary political and economic system.

Upon return to the United States at the end of 1989, I worked at the Center for Civil and Human Rights at Notre Dame Law School on a project cataloguing the archives of the Vicariate of Solidarity of the Archdiocese of Santiago. The vicariate's lawyers had meticulously recorded testimonies of people who had come looking for help or for missing loved ones. I developed a research database and for months spent eight hours a day reading people's firsthand accounts of being tortured; I then entered their experiences into the database. Through this emotionally disturbing window into people's suffering, the outlines of a larger strategy impressed themselves upon me. It became apparent that almost no one who was tortured had any information of interest to the military regime. Torture was simply part of the regime's larger aim to terrorize and atomize the body politic.

This insight became the core of my PhD dissertation at Duke, under Hauerwas's direction. In what would become my first book, *Torture and Eucharist*, I told the story of the Catholic Church under the military regime in Chile—the organizing, the protests, the excommunication of torturers by certain bishops—as the contest between two social imaginations: torture, which atomizes the body politic, and Eucharist, which draws the body back together. The book took the form of what would come to be called "ethnographic theology," an attempt to weave observations of the actual experience of the church in a particular time and place together with a constructive theology of some core Christian doctrine or doctrines.

Specifically, I tried to show how the experience of the Catholic Church in Chile could be construed eucharistically and ecclesiologically. The Eucharist is the breaking into the world of the eschatological presence of Jesus Christ, and the church is formed by the Eucharist into an alternative to the principalities and powers of the age. Or could be, anyway.

My subsequent work has focused mainly on developing political theologies that can reflect and support alternative spaces and practices to the violence of the nation-state and the exploitation of the market. I have written on violence, politics, and economics, often trying to unmask the covert theologies that underlie war, nationalism, consumerism, and other such practices that seem to me to be mostly and essentially contrary to actually following Jesus. Blurring the lines between theology and supposedly secular disciplines like political theory and economics is important if, as is increasingly obvious to me, everyone worships something—if not God, then the nation, money, security, celebrity, and so on. I have tried to hold up Christian practices that can resist such functional idolatries.

I have been particularly inspired by Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement, though I have come nowhere close to living Day's vision. I married a former Catholic Worker, and I was involved in a CW house of hospitality for Latina women and children in St. Paul, Minnesota, before moving to Chicago in 2011. The house was always on the verge of closing. If there is one way my mind and heart have changed, it is in the realization that any alternative space to the powers and principalities will always be on the verge of closing. This is not just because the powers are more powerful but because human frailty and sin infest the alternative spaces, too. This is nowhere more true than in the church.

The Catholic Church in Chile is a sad example. When I lived in Chile, significant portions of the church had a real vibrancy and credibility. It was led by people, both at the grassroots and in the hierarchy, who had imbibed the social Catholicism of the latter half of the 20th century, which advocated living out the gospel not only on Sundays but Monday through Saturday as well. Liturgies were entwined with life, none more poignant than the Good Friday *via crucis* that wound through our neighborhood, stopping at stations where people had been killed

and disappeared.

Today in Chile the church is in ruins, its credibility squandered by abuse and cover-up. As the hope fueled by the fall of Pinochet devolved into recent protests over continued inequality, the Catholic Church has been a target, not a catalyst, of the protests. A dozen Catholic churches have been burned or looted in the *estallido social* (social outburst) that began in October 2019. Pope John Paul II's deliberate strategy to rein in social Catholicism in Latin America has now borne its ugly fruit in Chile and elsewhere, the inevitable product of a generation of hierarchs who came not to serve but to be served. When Pope Francis's eyes were belatedly opened to sexual abuse and cover-up in Chile, he called the entire Chilean episcopal conference to Rome and demanded letters of resignation from every one of them. The hope I chronicled in my first book has been replaced by resignation.

The situation in the United States is not so different. In the wake of September 11, torture, not Eucharist, got the upper hand. Any moral authority that the US Catholic bishops might have had to resist torture, war, racism, nationalism, economic inequality, and other American ills rampant in the new millennium has been squandered by their proclivity to protect themselves and the institution of the church before protecting children and others in the church's care. Church attendance in the United States trends downward—the 21st does not appear to be the Christian century. This is not because, as some Catholics absurdly suggest, the church has been insufficiently clear about its moral teachings. As Pope Francis has grasped, it is not a lack of clarity but a lack of charity that has made belonging to the church unappealing and has put the credibility of the entire gospel in doubt.

Pope Francis is himself a sign of hope in the church, and I believe that hope will continue to pop up in different places at different times as long as the Holy Spirit remains promised to the church. The devil will continue to play Whac-a-Mole with such hopes but will never win the game.

The center of gravity of the church has shifted to the Global South, and there are many signs of life there, especially in Africa and Asia. Since moving to DePaul University in 2011, I have been a research fellow, and am now director, of the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology, a center for research on the Catholic Church in the Global South. We host scholars and practitioners from around the world, and whatever temporal hope I have for the church comes from my encounters with these tremendous people, so often wise, brave, faithful, and alive.

Just before the pandemic hit, I attended the Pan-African Catholic Congress at Bigard Memorial Seminary in Enugu, Nigeria. The academic papers were accompanied by conviviality, shared meals, and dancing. I could not fail to be impressed by the liveliness of Catholicism there. Bigard is the largest seminary in the world, with 855 seminarians. To hear them singing in chapel with one voice in English, Latin, and Igbo is to be hit by a wave of sound and spirit. There are another 20 seminaries in Nigeria bursting at the seams, and as many women religious in formation as men. Catholicism is deeply intertwined with social, economic, and political realities across Africa. Africa is now something like what Latin America was to me as a young Catholic in the 1980s.

But one thing I have learned is not to put too much stock in the usual, temporal ways of measuring vibrancy and—God help us—success. The devil will whack the church in Nigeria just as surely as he has whacked it elsewhere. There are already plenty of signs there of chaff mixed with the wheat, and dark clouds are on the horizon. I am not the first to warn of coming abuse scandals in Africa, and the issues of financial impropriety and the children and concubines of clergy have begun to be discussed publicly.

It has been a great joy to continually relearn the gospel afresh through the theologies and practices of Christians from parts of the world very different from my own. It is a fool's errand, however, to expect those Christians to save the church. The church anywhere is always on the verge of failing. It is only through the action of the Holy Spirit that somehow life and hope break through the suffocating confines of sin.

I got into theology because I was fascinated by the church, and I have worked extensively in ecclesiology. But finally I have realized that I have had too much church and not enough God. I recently heard a bishop explain that Catholic school is where he learned to love the church; he did not say where he learned to love God. In fact, in his talk on Catholic education, he did not mention God at all. The Catholicism I was raised in was too much about being Catholic, not enough about contemplating God. For most Catholics, myself included, it would have been embarrassing to ad-lib prayer in front of others or to talk, with a straight face, about a personal relationship with Jesus. Being Catholic was an identity, best expressed by cheering on the Notre Dame football team.

I remain deeply grateful for that identity, but in time I grew to want to mark the difference between Catholicism and Americanism by gospel criteria, such as nonviolence and attention to the poor. I have come to see that that effort is also misguided if it is too tied to forging an identity, even an identity as a Christian. Too much attention to the church means not enough attention to God, not enough devotion to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit who are the only proper end of our life on earth.

It is true, as Paul writes, that the church is the very body of Christ, but that body, as Paul also writes, is kenotic, self-emptying (Phil. 2:7). Christ did not grasp at power but emptied himself and took the form of a slave. The church needs to contemplate God in the icons of poor people, not contemplate itself in the mirror of its own self-identity. Pope Francis has warned of the church's "spiritual worldliness," which puts "a religious and pious veneer over the desire for power and influence, over vanity and even pride and arrogance." Francis has said that the church is only free when "centered in the *kenosis* of her Lord." Quoting St. Óscar Romero, he said the church "does not want her strength to be in the backing of the powerful or political leaders." Instead, the church "advances with noble detachment."

If the church in the United States rises from the ashes, it will not be because we elected the right president who packed the federal courts with judges who will defend the church's prerogatives. But nor will it be because the church has successfully established its brand as a prophetic agitator for social justice. The church is only attractive when people can see the poor Christ in it. The church should be a sacrament, a material form through which God is seen—a window to God, not an object in itself. My own work on Eucharist and politics is on the wrong track if it makes the Eucharist seem *useful*. Theology ultimately needs to be contemplative, to help us see Jesus Christ, the compassion and self-abandonment of the Father through the Spirit.

Much of my recent work has been an exploration of the concept and practice of idolatry. A decade ago, in a book called *The Myth of Religious Violence*, I argued that people kill for all sorts of things they treat as gods, both explicitly invoked deities and more supposedly mundane things like flags and freedom and oil and ethnicity and land and nationality and belief in free markets. Although I did not use the word *idolatry* in that book, the theological subtext was the idea that people devote themselves to identities that substitute for God. I am now working on a more explicitly theological book exploring the biblical idea that everyone worships, and everyone worships badly. The church is no exception. In some ways our idolatry is worse, because our self-worship is couched explicitly in the language of the worship of God.

Because salvation history is ultimately a comedy and not a tragedy, however, even idolatry is redeemable, and idolatry even betrays a certain positive dimension of human striving. We see this ambivalence in Paul's reaction to the Athenians in Acts 17. He is repulsed by their idolatry but also sees it as evidence that they are groping for the true God. As Paul explains, God created everything and everyone so that they might seek God, for, as even the pagans say, "We are all his children" (Acts 17:28).

In my own case, I remain eternally grateful to the church for making me the kind of idolater I am. I may have had too much church, but I came to love God through the church, and I would not have found Jesus without the church. I am now embarrassed by the teenage arrogance with which I tossed the devotional kitsch in the trash, and I dearly wish I could find my grandfather's gruesome Sacred Heart. It was a sacrament, an icon, a symbol of

my grandpa's devotion—not an idol. The idol was my own pride. I hope that the rest of my journey will increasingly turn my many idolatries toward contemplation of God.

I love my fellow travelers on this journey, and I am sad to see the church in disarray. I hope that people return to celebrating the liturgy once the pandemic subsides. But the church is always on the verge of failing, and recognizing this allows for some hope that God, not we, will do something new. As Thomas Merton wrote, "Hope then is a gift. Like life, it is a gift from God, total, unexpected, incomprehensible, undeserved . . . but to meet it, we have to descend into nothingness."

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The church among idols."