

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



NO. 98: OCTOBER 23, 2014



**ROD DREHER** is an author and blogger who currently writes a blog for *The American Conservative* and is finishing a book about Dante's *Divine Comedy*. He spoke with Boisi Center graduate research assistant **Yael Levin Hungerford** and undergraduate research assistant **Sean Keeley** before participating in a Boisi Center panel on writing about religion in a polarized age.

## PART I: DANTE

**HUNGERFORD:** You describe Dante's *Divine Comedy*—the subject of your current book project—as a self-help book, in fact “the most astonishing self-help book ever written.” What do you mean by that?

**DREHER:** I came to the *Divine Comedy* by accident. I moved back to Louisiana—to my hometown—three years ago, after the death of my sister, Ruthie. I wrote a book about it called *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming*.

I thought it was going to be a happy ending, but it turned out not to be. Her death was a real occasion of grace—she met her death from cancer bravely and with great faith—and it changed my heart and made me want to go back to Louisiana to be part of the community in which I had grown up and help my family. But my family didn't really receive me in the way that I wanted to be received. The narrative that had been established from my childhood—that Rod was the weirdo who left town, went to the city, got above himself—hadn't changed.

After I went home, my sister Ruthie's oldest daughter, Hannah, told me that, “you're really going to have a tough time here because our mother raised us to believe that you were bad for leaving home.” When she told me that, I had already finished all but the last chapter of the

book. It just devastated me. Hannah said that my father, Ruthie's father (I call him Paw in the book), had done this too, that he had great disregard for me for having left home. They had never told me that. I knew there was some tension. And I



had all these opportunities, when I came home, to try to mend those fences. It didn't go anywhere. And it was devastating to me. But I went back and I finished the book. I talk about this in *The Little Way*—that this is hard, but this is what love requires.

As it happened, nothing got better. You can only do so much. I tried and tried; nothing worked. I fell into an emotional

depression. I was physically ill. I had chronic fatigue. The doctors tested me and said there's really no underlying reason for this, therefore it must be stress. What are you stressed about? I said, “Well, I'll tell you.” I told them that I wanted nothing more than to come home and be with my family, and the door was closed as I was right at the threshold. I didn't know what to do about it.

My doctor said I would have to move or I'd lose my health. I said, “I can't do either. My kids are happy here. I can't move my kids around again. I've uprooted them so many times over the course of my career. Plus, my parents are old, and I need to be here for them.” He said, “Well, you better find inner peace.”

So that's how I went into therapy. My priest gave me a prayer rule. And then I fell into Dante in a bookstore one day. I don't read poetry. I don't read much fiction. I pulled it off the shelf and started reading: “In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself in a dark wood, for I'd lost the straight path.” I thought that sounded familiar, and kept reading.

Over the course of this journey through the *Commedia*, I saw that this was a book written by a man who had suffered greatly. Of course I'd learned Dante's story: he had been on the top of the world; he was a celebrated poet, at the pinnacle

of his powers as a city leader. And then everything was taken away from him. He had to figure out how to live and how to affirm the goodness of life in the middle of that.

What happened to me was not remotely as serious as what happened to Dante, but I drew so much inspiration from the work. When I read a letter that he wrote to his patron explaining the *Commedia* to him, he said that “the purpose of my book is to bring people from a state of misery to a state of happiness.” I said, “Of course it is.”

What he did was give me a framework for understanding what happened to me. In particular, for making sense of the fact that I knew my parents loved me, I knew my sister loved me; but why did they act this way? Why couldn't we see eye to eye?

Dante explains that sin is a matter not of hatred, necessarily, but of twisted love—suddenly that was a key for me. In the *Purgatorio*, he meets Marco the Lombard who tells him, “Brother, the world is blind and you're blind too, but you have the power of free will. You don't have to accept it. You know, we all have to live with it, but you don't have to let it conquer you.”

That was a tremendously important turning point for me. The therapist I was seeing at the time said the same thing. “You cannot change your family, but you have power to change your reaction to it.” So oddly enough, what I was being told by my therapist was the same thing I was reading in the *Commedia*. But I could take it from the *Commedia*, because unlike my attitude towards therapy, I wasn't snarky and defensive.

The only reason I went to see a therapist was my wife and my doctor said I had to do it. I was cynical, but it turned out to be great. I had to humble myself. That's what Dante says too in *Purgatorio*: the only way you're going to get out of this dark wood you're in is to humble your-

self, accept help and accept grace. That's what Dante taught me to do.

So in that sense, it's a self-help book. The book I'm writing is called *How Dante Can Save Your Life*, because he really did give me a new life, I believe. Nothing has changed in my daily life back in Louisiana, but everything changed inside. He gave me strength. I think he can really help a lot of people.

**HUNGERFORD:** What is it about Dante's words that spoke to you in a way that your therapist's alone didn't?

**DREHER:** It's his artistry. It's fantastic the way he works. In the *Purgatorio*,

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“I used to think all of life was in *The Godfather*, parts one and two. No, it's all in the *Commedia*.”

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the dispositions we have toward sin get straightened out when he starts to go through the terraces on the mountain of purgatory. The method Dante uses—or the method in the *Commedia* that God uses—to straighten people out is you initially are confronted. Dante the pilgrim is confronted with hand carvings in the mountain done by the finger of God of different scenes from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, illustrating the virtue that he's trying to teach the penitent. Dante is trying to show us, his readers, that if you're overcome with beauty and wonder, you prepare the imagination for moral instruction. I found out that's what happened to me.

Early in life I had decided that religion was empty until I wandered into the Chartres Cathedral at age seventeen and was so knocked off my feet by the

beauty and the complexity of it. I didn't know if God existed, but I said, I want to be part of the religious imagination that can build something so beautiful and complex. Taking up Dante, this time at forty-six, was a Chartres Cathedral experience for me. It was the beauty that prepared my imagination—the beauty of Dante's verse that prepared my imagination for the moral instruction.

**HUNGERFORD:** You say you had to learn how to make your family and home the proper type of goods—not idols. How did you do that?

**DREHER:** I had been raised to think of family and place—this little town in south Louisiana—as being primary goods, because I do come from a good family and a good place. But they got confused in my mind. My father is such an embodiment of family and place. That was what he loves more than anything, what my sister loved more than anything.

Without quite realizing what had happened, reading Dante unmasked this for me. I had rejected their idolization of family and place in my mind, because I left there—I moved away—but in my heart, I really hadn't.

I only realized when I got deeply into Dante, and deeply into this contemplative prayer rule that my priest had given me, that this was why I didn't think God loved me. I thought I had to keep working to get God's approval, because I saw God, the Father, as being like my earthly father.

I knew that my dad loved me, but also that he didn't approve of me. He didn't approve of my choices. He couldn't affirm me. Armchair psychologists could have figured this out, but I couldn't see it myself. I was in the middle of it. Despite my theological sophistication, in my heart of hearts, I had confused my earthly father with God the Father.

After this realization, I was able to separate them and to throw down the idols of family and place. Then everything

began to open up within me, and I was able to see family and place as goods but not the ultimate good. And insofar as they are good, they are good because they conform to the will of God. For me, that was revolutionary. I realized what a burden I'd been carrying around all these years, a burden of guilt for having let my family down by moving away. It was one thing to know in my mind that they were wrong, but another thing to feel it in my heart. We think we can intellectualize our way out of a problem, but you really can't. Sometimes you just have to suffer your way through it and come out to the other side.

**HUNGERFORD:** Who is the audience that you're writing this book for?

**DREHER:** I'm writing this book for people like myself—people who aren't literary scholars or who aren't particularly literary but who also aren't the sort of people who will buy a self-help book. I want them to know that God can speak to us in any number of ways. He will use anything in creation to reach out to us and call us back to Himself. He happened to use this amazing literary masterpiece to reach me in my own dark wood.

I think there are a lot of people out there who will respond to Dante, but who would be like me and never pick it up. For me, it was one of these great books that I wish I had read in college, but never did. I thought I would pick it up when I was old and sitting around the fireplace in my armchair. I never would have realized how much life and relevance was in this text if I hadn't been so broken by experience that I said, all right, what else you got? What could this hurt? The book was so full of life. All of life is in the *Commedia*. I used to think all of life was in *The Godfather*, parts one and two. No, it's all in the *Commedia*.

I find that people who've read it have such different reactions to it because it speaks to different parts of us. One scene in the *Inferno* that struck me was when Dante



Rod Dreher (far right) speaks with Sarah Posner and Mark Oppenheimer at the Boise Center's October 23, 2014, panel on writing about religion in a polarized age.

meets Farinata—a Ghibelline warlord who is so proud of his place and his family's position, and yet couldn't see that he's in hell. All he wants to know about Dante is whether he was good enough to talk to. I see my family in that scene. They don't understand that everything has changed. But I also see—or rather, saw—myself, holding on to all these old hurts. They're just holding on to position and place.

Another striking scene in the *Inferno* is when one of the corrupt popes is shoved upside-down in a baptismal font; that helped me so much, because here is Dante, who is such a devout Catholic—and who wrote the most incredible work of religious art ever in prose or poetry—here he is condemning the corruption of the Church. This helped me so much, because the whole time I was raging at the corruption in the Catholic Church, there was a part of me that felt guilty, like I was blaspheming against my own father. Pope Benedict XV, in the early part of the 20th century, wrote an encyclical praising Dante as being the poet for the ages and a great Catholic. That there was a man who felt even angrier at the corruption in the Church than I did but who still affirmed the goodness of God—and who still affirmed the church—to me, that was such a revelation.

And so these two things are what spoke to me in particular about the *Inferno*. But other people, whatever their own experiences, they can find it in *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*.

## PART II: WRITING ABOUT RELIGION

**KEELEY:** In order to write about religion successfully and meaningfully, do you think there's an advantage to being a religious person or do you think non-believers or secularists can write about religion in a thoughtful and intelligent way without just trying to score political points?

**DREHER:** I used to think that there's really no particular advantage to being a religious person. I don't believe that anymore.

On the way up to Boston today, I was reading a manuscript of a forthcoming book—memoir by a man who was an American convert to Islam who, after 9-11, ended up becoming a Christian. He doesn't write at all with anger about his time as a Muslim. He writes with great love and affection. I was down there when the twin towers were attacked; I was working for the *New York Post* then.

I watched the South Tower fall, and I had to deal with an immense amount of anger at Islam because of that. But reading this man's book this morning on the way up here made me realize that at some level, I understand a pious Muslim more than I understand people in my own family who are secularists, because we have that base—we believe that there is a reality beyond ourselves and greater than we can understand.

When I read something written by an Orthodox Jew or a Muslim or a Mormon, I feel that even if I don't agree with them theologically or maybe their moral position, I understand better where they're coming from.

I find that it's almost an unbridgeable chasm between religious people—or religiously orthodox people—and secularists in that so many secularists seem to believe that Enlightenment liberalism is the default position that describes reality. It's not just one position among many. It becomes so difficult to talk across that religious divide.

I really like being able to find this common ground when speaking with people who see the world through religious eyes. It helps me to understand religion—the religious dimension—in news stories, which I think might simply not appear to people who don't have faith.

**KEELEY:** You have said on your blog that one of the benefits of writing about religion in a polarized age is that there's no single authority. There are all these different perspectives you can find on religious issues. But I'm wondering: do you think that might also have a negative side to it—that people will only listen to the one side that they already agree with?

**DREHER:** It's a blessing and a curse. I saw the great blessing of the diversity and the cacophony of internet religion writing when the Catholic abuse scandal broke. It meant that we Catholics (I was Catholic then) did not have to depend on official sources or the mainstream me-

dia—which in some cases did a very good job, but which did not have the depth of theological knowledge that people within the church did.

But the downside—the inevitably inseparable downside—is, as you say, that people only listen to those who already agree with them. It is so frustrating. I try myself to read people who don't agree with me, who I think are arguing in good faith.

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**“As a religious believer I worry about whether my children are going to keep the faith, because we live in a world of so much moral chaos.”**

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I'm religiously conservative, religiously orthodox, but I see a lot of people on my own side who don't argue in good faith—who just want to argue for the sake of arguing and defeating their opponents. I see it all the time on the other side too.

I think that what one has to do is to cultivate an intellectual disposition of openness and fairness, and fight hard to seek out those on the other side who can disagree in good faith. It's a difficult task. I have a lot of commentators, for example, on my blog, and I pride myself on curating the comments threads to make it a civil conversation. Half or maybe even more than half of the people who comment on my blog don't agree with me, but I'm happy to have them there, as long as they will do it in a civil way. It's been hard work to do that, but people who read

my blog tell me that's why they keep coming, even though I drive them crazy with my opinions sometimes, because they know they can dissent in a thoughtful way, and they will get thoughtful dissent back.

## PART III: THE BENEDICT OPTION

**HUNGERFORD:** On your blog you have written extensively about what you call the Benedict Option. What is the Benedict Option, and why is now a good time to be exploring it?

**DREHER:** When I walked in here, I saw Alasdair MacIntyre's great book *After Virtue* on the shelf. It's a work of moral philosophy. I read it a few years ago, and the final paragraph just really struck me. The book is about how, in modernity—in late modernity, in our time—it becomes very difficult for people to have a conversation about morality because we have so many different narratives going through our head. The fundamental divide between secularists and religious people that I was talking about earlier means that it becomes difficult, even if both parties have good will, to agree on commonality, because we just interpret the world so differently. This is what MacIntyre talks about in *After Virtue*. He explains that the world is in such epistemic chaos that things are falling apart. It's like the late Roman empire. We have lost something important in terms of trying to make moral sense of the world. MacIntyre makes one wonder: are we living in a new Dark Age—an age that's not dark because we lack material wealth, but because we lack confidence that truth can be known, and we lack a common ground, a common vision?

What we were looking for is a new and very different St. Benedict—Benedict of Nursia, the monk of the fifth and sixth century who left Rome as it was falling apart and went out into the woods to pray. He gained a reputation as a holy man and





founded the Benedictine Order, which, over centuries, became the means by which Europe found its way out of chaos, and they preserved the heritage of the classical world as well as the Christian faith through the so-called Dark Ages.

I think MacIntyre's right. I've found as a religious believer that I worry about whether my children are going to keep the faith, because we live in a world of so much moral chaos. If they don't see the faith being lived out, how are they going to hold on to it? To me, that's the most important thing. I don't care if they're rich or poor or whatever. I want them to still be Christian—in the fullest sense of the word, not just nominally holding on to the faith, but being transformed in Christ and being open to their neighbors and being faithful and all the things that you associate with Christianity. So I began to wonder, how can we do this? What would a new St. Benedict look like—someone who figured out a way to live out the tradition of our faith in a time of chaos? I don't know what the answer is, but I know we have to try to find it.

One thing I really noticed about going back to my hometown—I'm from a little town of about 1,700 people on the Mississippi River—is that religion has been hollowed out. Young people are religiously inarticulate. Christian Smith of Notre Dame came up with the title “moralistic therapeutic deism” to describe the default

religion of most Americans—American young people, but also my parents' generation. It's the view that God is up there, sort of a cosmic butler, kind of keeping an eye on things. You only really need to call him if you need something. Good people go to heaven, and we're all good, except Hitler. Smith found that that's true across all religions in America—Judaism, Islam, Christianity. Only the evangelicals, to some extent, and the Mormons, to a great extent, are avoiding this sort of thing.

Well, there's more to religion than that—or there ought to be. I've seen how corrosive it is in my own community, where the idea of there being a religious tradition to conserve is just gone. It's all about how do I feel? *Jesus is my boyfriend*. That's not the faith that defeated segregation. That's not the faith of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Who knows what my kids are going to have to face—what injustices in the future they're going to have to endure. This sort of smarmy, bourgeois pseudo-religion is not going to make it.

So I want to work on a book on what I call the Benedict Option, meaning the choice to strategically withdraw from the mainstream. It's not about running off to the woods and living in a David Koresh-like compound; I think that's wrong, and it's unworkable, and it has its own problems. But I want to find a way for religious peo-

ple—Christians in my case, but I've also talked to a Jewish friend about this—to live in community with each other, practice the faith, raise the next generation to have a real faith—not a sort of brittle shell, but a real muscular faith; to internalize the faith and to live this out in a world that tells them there is no truth or that truth is just whatever you think it is. I don't mean for it to be utopian. We all know how utopian communities end up. I want to look at something that's real and workable.

I visited a Benedictine monastery—built over the house of St. Benedict—during my recent trip to Italy for my book on Dante. American monks live there now. It had been closed down by Napoleon in the 1800s, but they reopened it in about the year 2000. I talked to the prior there and I told him about the Benedict Option. He listened; he had never heard of it before. He said that's the only way that the faith is going to survive what's coming. I don't think he was talking about some big persecution, like some end-of-times fantasist thing, but just the daily grind of the faith not meaning anything.

The monk was telling me that young people in Italy don't think about their traditions. All they want to do is go to New York—you know, adopt American popular culture. They see religion as just this antiquated thing.

All it takes is one or two generations to forget and it's gone. The monk was telling me there's a community of Catholics who live in a town over the mountains from the monastery who are trying to live out what I call the Benedict Option. He said they're really suffering, because this is not something that is common in Italy—the idea of homeschooling, for example—but those are the kind of people who are going to make it, when everybody else is going to fall away.

**HUNGERFORD:** It strikes me, especially having come from somewhat of a community like that myself, that there is a cost to the individual in such a com-

munity. I imagine what I have in mind is similar to what you experienced in your hometown.

**DREHER:** You've hit on it right there. This is a tension within me and within my thinking, and something I will have to explore when I begin the book on the Benedict Option. I am not someone who does well in community, because I come from a very tight-knit community. I was bullied in high school, and the kids who were the bullies were from the leading families, in many cases. It's an old story. And the system turned a blind eye to it.

You see this over and over in the Catholic church. I remember talking to people in south Louisiana about the 1980s abuse scandal, about the Diocese of Lafayette. Catholics who raised their voice about that were hounded, not by the clergy—although there was that—but by their fellow parishioners that didn't want to hear it. I can't stand that. And so I would probably be the first one in the Benedict Option community to say: "hang on, wait a minute." But you can't live that way. You can't have a community of free individuals. The tensions will pull you apart.

So I don't know the answer to that. But it's something I'm willing to explore. I feel that we can't let the "perfect" become the enemy of the "good enough." I think we who are religious need to think about what part of our autonomy we are willing to give up for the comforts and the benefits of community. I don't think there's a formulaic answer. There's no utopia; we have to get rid of that idea. But simply saying you can never have utopia does not settle the question of what the ideal way to live is. It is an old, old political question—pre-Christian, going back to the Greeks, at least: How do we live together in a virtuous community? We have a particular challenge right now, at this stage in our cultural history in the West, where we're going to have to ask that question in a way that it hasn't been asked in a very long time.

## PART IV: CATHOLIC CONCERNS

**HUNGERFORD:** It sounds like you're suggesting that a lot of religion seems to be overwhelmed by liberalism these days, which brings us to the Synod on the Family that's happening right now in Rome. There are rumors that the Catholic Church is going to be more welcoming to people it wasn't as welcoming to before: gay people, people who've had children out of wedlock, divorced people who divorced without annulment. What do you think about these changes?

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**“Western civilization stands or falls on the health of the Catholic Church—because it has the roots and it has made western civilization.”**

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**DREHER:** I'll start by saying I'm an ex-Catholic, so my opinion doesn't matter that much. But I do have strong opinions on the topic because I really do believe that the western civilization stands or falls on the health of the Catholic Church—because it has the roots and it has made western civilization. It hasn't always distinguished itself, but even an ex-Catholic like me has to give the Church its due. So I want to see the Church healthy.

No church exists or should exist for itself. It exists as primary means to bring people in union with God. Pope Francis is right to say the Church has to find a way to speak to the world as it is. One thing I learned from my experience in the sex

abuse scandal: I thought that, because I had all the syllogisms straight in my head—had all this theology in my head—that my reason would help me withstand anything. And it's not true. Your reason can become overwhelmed by horror. That's what happened to me.

I think a lot of Catholics—conservative Catholics, people I consider my ideological allies—have way too much faith in the power of reason. There're some conservatives—older conservative Catholics—who feel like just reasserting the doctrine is going to restore that authority. It's not. You cannot just proclaim the doctrine, and I think Francis gets that.

It's also the case that we in the church—Catholic and otherwise—have been cruel to gays and lesbians in the past. My oldest friend is a gay Catholic; he's chaste and he follows the Church's teaching. But I've seen what's happened, and Francis is right to want to change it.

The thing that worries me greatly is that, in trying so hard to change and conform the Catholic church to contemporary standards in the West, the Church is going to concede too much, and things are going to collapse—or the authority is going to collapse more than it has. I say that knowing that the abuse scandal has caused a massive collapse in Catholic authority that can't be undone. I've seen from the other side, when I was covering the scandal, how the language of welcome, the language of tolerance, was used to cover up a lot of evil. It concerns me that that's happening again, or that that could happen. I'm a lot more realistic—some might call it cynical—about religious rhetoric, about how you want to be open and all that. Some of the people who said the best things—the things that one could stand up and cheer for—were the ones doing the worst in terms of covering things up. I think it puts the Catholic Church and people like me, who wish it well—even though I'm not part of it anymore—in a really difficult position, because the world is not listening.

But at the same time, if Pope Francis and the Catholic Church lose those who are most dedicated to the faith—who are holding on even though they may be in parishes where the faith is not taught or the traditional Catholicism is run down—if they alienate them, who’s going to be left?

In France today, it’s over-generalizing to say the only people going to mass are the traditionalist Catholics, but it’s not a great over-generalization. If you try so hard to reach out—to use the language of marketing—you could dilute your brand, and you can lose your most faithful customers and not gain any more. I hate to speak of the Church in those terms, but that’s what I’m getting at.

So it’s something that concerns me. I think that no Christian—Protestant or Eastern Orthodox, as I am—can look at what’s happening in the Catholic church with indifference. Metropolitan Hilarion of the Moscow Patriarchate in the Russian Orthodox Church has done a lot of ecumenical work in Europe and he has said that orthodox Catholics and Protestants have to stick together now, because the world has changed. We don’t have the luxury of fighting among ourselves—we’ve got to figure out how we can work together. I think that’s true.

**HUNGERFORD:** With regard to the sex abuse scandal, you have identified aspects of the institutional structure of the Church that contributed to the scandal. Can you explain the nature of your criticism?

**DREHER:** Right after the John Geoghan trial in Boston, I wrote a cover story for *National Review* (I had just started working there) about how the Church needed to get its act together on this. It was such an anodyne story to look back on, given what we later learned about the nature of the scandal; but back then it was a big deal for a story like that to appear in *National Review*. I started hearing from conservative Catholics saying, “thank you for writing about this, because we



feel like, now that *National Review* has covered it, we have permission to speak out about things we’ve seen.” There was a strong sense of loyalty—that it was being disloyal to criticize the institution. I remember Cardinal Law of Boston, back in the 1990s, thundering against the Boston Globe for doing the work of the devil. The man was a straight-up hypocrite, as we learned from the Geoghan trial and subsequent revelations.

As a Catholic, I thought it was my responsibility to do this. I remember hearing from a conservative archbishop—whom I never met in person, but with whom I had a friendly correspondence—after my articles about the scandal in *National Review* came out. He told me I had to stop airing dirty laundry in public. I said in response: “Maybe you don’t understand, Archbishop—this is what’s really going on.” I sent him some excerpts from letters conservative Catholics had sent to me (with the identifying information taken out) and said “This is what’s happening. These are our people.” He wouldn’t listen. He said “you’ve got to stop doing this.” Finally I told him, “I’ve got to do this because I don’t trust you bishops to fix this. You’ve had all this time. You’ve known this has been going on since at least 1985.” And he said to me, “If you don’t trust bishops to fix this, why are you still a Catholic?” I said, “Because I believe what the Catholic Church

teaches is true.” But his mindset was so interesting to me. To him—and he’s one of the best bishops the Catholic Church has in America—the institutional church was for itself. You know, they were the church. You’re tearing down the institution by telling tales out of school.

I saw this clericalist mindset play out over and over and over again. People just wouldn’t tell the truth. They knew what was going on. Priests knew what was going on. Laypeople knew what was going on. But it was so important to them that the Church remain immaculate. It was tearing families apart.

The hypocrisy is evil. Solzhenitsyn said the line between good and evil runs right down the middle of every human heart.

I think that too many laypeople—on the left and the right or in the great middle—didn’t want to face it. They said this is something happening elsewhere. I saw it in my own parish in Dallas (where we lived after New York), where most people just didn’t want to talk about it. Dallas was very hard hit by the scandal, but people wanted so badly to believe that everything was OK around us—that it wasn’t happening to us—that they were willing to throw these families to the dogs.

It upset me to no end, because this is not what the Church is for. This is not what the Church is about. You see these bishops apologizing; they should resign.

I don't believe Rome is going to do anything either, until they start taking some of these bishops down. Will that happen? No, probably not. But I don't believe that the Catholic Church will even begin to repair its credibility until some of these princes of the Church are made to suffer for what they allowed.

**HUNGERFORD:** That sounds very problematic if the future of western civilization relies on the health of the Church.

**DREHER:** You see why I'm so worried? I remember back when the scandal broke in 2002, Jody Bottum at *First Things* was just distraught. He had been working to get the Catholic bishops on the same page to fight cloning and fight for the dignity of human life and against genetic experimentation—hugely important issues. They were just about to come out with something, I believe. And then this happened, and it destroyed their credibility on any topic.

I remember Jody being so upset by that. I completely understood why, because things like genetic experimentation and cloning concern the nature of what it means to be human. This is a really big thing, and is going to be an even bigger thing over the course of this century. The church—the Catholic Church, all churches—need to have a credible voice on these issues. But these Catholic bishops, because they were protecting their own and protecting the image of the Church, threw away all their moral authority. Now nobody will listen to them on anything. If a Catholic bishop told me that it was raining outside, I'd have to go stick my hand out the window to be sure, because I saw how many times they lied and how they would lie with ice in their veins to protect the Church—anything to protect the image of the Church.

**HUNGERFORD:** Is there something Catholic institutions like Boston College—and also Catholic individuals—can do on this topic?

**DREHER:** I think that Catholic institutions like Boston College, parishes, and religious orders need to give people reason for hope. And I say that as somebody who needs it myself.

When I became Eastern Orthodox, I had to make a decision not to get involved in church politics, because there is no perfect church. The Eastern Orthodox church also has its own big problems. But as Dante knew, the governance of the church is not the church—it's part of the church, but it's not the church. To bring about a healthy spirituality within myself, I've had to do a lot more prayer and a lot more going to the liturgy, confession, sacrament, and spiritual reading. And it's helped me. It's the kind of thing that, if I had been doing it when I was out there fighting this battle on the scandal, things might have turned out differently for me.

I'm not sorry I'm Orthodox. I'm glad God humbled me, in the end, the way He did, because I would hate to think I was as arrogant an orthodox Christian as I was a Catholic Christian. That's on me. That's not the Church's fault. That's my fault.

That said, having gone to this Benedictine monastery in Norcia just for a couple of days gave me such hope, because these are all men—most of them young men—just radiated goodness. There's nothing arrogant about them. They're simple. They pray. They work. They love God. You can feel it when you're around them. You're like, ah, this is what the Church is about. It's not about cynicism and ass covering and power plays. It's about love and truth. I mean these guys are orthodox Catholics, but they give you reason to hope.

That's what I'm hoping to do with the Dante book too. It's so easy to be cynical about the Church. And cynicism is realism in many ways these days. But there's something beyond that—we can't give evil this victory. It doesn't deserve it.

Pope Benedict XVI—whom I really love (I chose my patron saint, when I became

Orthodox, as St. Benedict, not only because I pray to St. Benedict to help me figure out how to help others and use my vocation wisely, but also to honor Pope Benedict, who had just become pope when I left)—said the best arguments for the Catholic faith are not in theology books, but they're in the art and the saints the Church produced. I think that's really true. It sounded good at the time, but the more I've gotten deeper I've gotten into the faith, the more I realize that's true. All the theology I carried in my head didn't save me. The things that kept me a Christian were thinking about Chartres and thinking about the saints I knew within the Catholic Church and outside the Catholic Church too—the people who are really good and who knew exactly what was going on and still held on, the way Dante did. I wasn't strong enough to do that then. But I hope I'm strong enough—whatever tests may come—to do that in the future.



Insofar as Catholic institutions like BC, parishes and others can affirm that vision and not deny the evil, but affirm goodness even in the midst of evil, then they will not only serve the Church, they'll serve humanity.

[END]

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