

ONLY WONDER COMPREHENDS



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John Garvey in *Commonweal*

Edited by Patrick Jordan



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*For the Garvey clan*

*Anytime you write something that comes off all right,  
you wonder where it came from.*

—John Garvey, October 26, 1990

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## Foreword

For over forty years, John Garvey (1944–2015) was what I would call the “ballast” of *Commonweal* magazine (the leading lay-edited Catholic journal of opinion in the United States). John’s essays, book reviews, and consistently notable columns (repeatedly awarded “Best Column” in the Catholic press), revealed not only his acuity and alacrity, but his uncommon spiritual insight. These in turn provided momentum and substance for whatever followed in a given issue of the magazine. That’s because John never hesitated to wrestle with some of the most challenging and intractable topics of the day, and did so with wit and refreshing intelligence. He loved to write, and in return, his readers relished what he wrote.

John Garvey was born of a large Midwestern Catholic family, and grew up in Springfield, Illinois. His father and an uncle established Templegate Publishers. John was the oldest of nine. He graduated from the University of Notre Dame in 1967, and married Regina Carbonell the same year. After completing alternative service as a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, John worked briefly for Templegate and began writing for *The Critic*. In 1973, his reviews and articles began to appear in *Commonweal*, and in 1976 he was hired as a regular columnist—an assignment he relinquished only at death. In

the mid-1980s, needing further income to support his family, he became a staff writer for the Republican members of the Illinois State Legislature. He said his understanding of politics, legislative processes, state budgets, and economics in general were honed by that experience.

A Roman Catholic by heritage, training, and early commitment, John's middle years found him searching for a deeper sense of Christian belief, prayer, and practice. This in turn led him to embrace Orthodoxy in 1984, to undertake seminary studies in New York State, and to be ordained a priest in 1992. For the next twenty-two years, he served as a pastor and a gifted explicator of Orthodox theology and tradition, not only in the pages of *Commonweal*, but also in a number of books that constitute an enduring theological and ecumenical legacy.

The present volume, gleaned from John Garvey's many contributions to *Commonweal*, is comprised primarily of columns written during the final decade of his life. (Earlier columns have appeared in previously published works.) This collection also includes several essays and reviews from John's earlier years, in the hope that readers will gain not only a broader sense of John's interests and range, but also experience his relevance for the moral, political, cultural, and spiritual issues that continue to confound us.

The volume is divided into five general sections, related to various themes in John's work:

1. Faith as understood and practiced in a post-Christian, scientific world.
2. The relevance of contemporary authors and artists for our self-understanding.
3. Life, death, and love in light of the Incarnation and the Resurrection.

4. A contemporary priest's "care of souls" in response to such issues as disbelief, pacifism, same-sex marriage, and women priests.
5. A coda to recap and illustrate John's love of life and the vitality of his faith.

As noted, John Garvey was steeped in the Christian tradition, in particular the theology, practice, and luminous heritage of the Orthodox communion. Yet he remained ever attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit wherever they might be discovered—and wherever they led him. It is hoped that this brief selection of his writings from *Commonweal* will inspire readers to cultivate a similar sense of attentiveness and commitment, for as the author himself observed: "Religious traditions are meant to transform us, not to affirm us as we are."

It was my privilege—as an editor at *Commonweal*—to work with John Garvey over many years, and to share ideas, suggestions, and much laughter. I am indebted to his wife Regina for her encouragement and continuing inspiration; and to *Commonweal's* editor, Paul Baumann, and its publisher, Thomas Baker, for their direction and support in this project. The same must be said of the entire staff, but in particular Ellen Koneck, special-projects director, and a number of willing and unsung interns, among them Caroline Belden, Nick Haggerty, and Catherine Larrabee, who gathered, read, and assembled megareams of material. I hope and trust that readers will enjoy the fruit of their handiwork as much as I. Read on!

*Patrick Jordan*



# FOUNDINGS





## *Climbing Trees*

I grew up at the edge of Springfield, Illinois, across the street from open spaces, an active farm with cattle and corn growing in a field that adjoined the pasture. Beyond the farm was a forest, and another forest lay a few houses away from the north side of our house. After a few years the farm died but the fields remained, and the fields and forests were great places to explore and play in. I loved one tree in particular; its branches grew in a way that made it perfect for climbing. When I was nine or ten I would climb it nearly to the top, which was as high as the roofline of our house, and when storms were coming and the wind picked up, I liked getting as close to the top as I could, holding on when the tree began lashing back and forth. I was able to get away with this because my parents had lots of other, younger kids to herd and were often distracted.

Though I didn't really appreciate it at the time, the tree was my introduction to philosophy and a sense of deep mystery, of something sacred. I loved reading about science and had recently learned that we can only see part of the full spectrum of light. Looking at the tree one day I realized that I really couldn't see all of it; there were colors poured out there that were beyond my vision. Then I realized that I could see the

tree from only one angle, that of a small boy. If I moved a few feet the branches took on a different configuration. If I were a giant, seeing it from above, it would seem very different. (It was easy to imagine this because one of the ways I found it tolerable to eat broccoli was to pretend I was a giant eating trees.) If I saw it from the perspective of a grasshopper it would be unimaginably vast. I slowly came to understand that I could see the tree from only one point of view at a time, always in a limited way.

Still, what was the tree apart from my ways of seeing it? It plainly was something that would in some ways always be beyond me, mysterious, largely unknowable—no matter how many things I could know about it. Only God could really know the tree as it was; only God could know the final *thatness* of the tree. Years later I found the same sense of the deep silence and mystery of things in Rilke's poetry, with its sense that this silence speaks to us, and must, and that something human dies when we fail to listen.

I have been very aware of this in recent months, because after years in a busy parish ministry I am now attached to a church where the pastor does virtually all the work, and I have a lot of time to write and read and be alone. I do occasionally have to fill in for the pastor, or substitute for priests in other parishes, but for the most part my days are filled with solitude. I have found that I like and even need this; and I know it's a rare luxury. In a way, it is a return for me to the day when I first saw the tree as full of mystery.

To a certain extent it is also a necessity, for at least some of our day, to spend time alone and in silence. A certain amount of silence and solitude is necessary for any appreciation of the sacred. There are times in life when this is nearly impossible . . . for example, when you are a young parent. My fear, though, is not that some people find this impossible; the prob-



lem is rather that most of us flee from it. I know that even when I am alone, I like music in the background, or the sound of the radio. I have to force myself to turn it off and simply sit down. But it is only when we go against the grain and force ourselves to do this that we begin to see the usual noise our minds make, that we begin to let that clatter settle down and to sense the real world around us. This is necessary for any serious prayer or meditation. Otherwise the words of prayer are not listened to in any depth, and the silence that is necessary as the place into which the words are spoken will not be real for us.

It is less and less possible to do this. No, it is almost always possible to do this, but we live in an age when the temptations not to experience solitude in any way are all around us. I often get up very early, and I am amazed when I look outside our apartment and see someone walking down the street at 5:30 in the morning with a cell phone to the side of his head, talking away. The sight of all those people chattering on cell phones all the time is the clearest recent sign of how terrified we are to be alone.

Once I was away from television for a few years; then I was sent to a convention, turned on the television set in the hotel room, and was astounded at the visual racket. It didn't take long to get acclimated all over again, but the time I had spent away from that particular form of distraction made me aware of how noisy, lurid, and even violent its effects can be.

The problem is not only that it is good for us to live with a sense of mystery and the sacred, or that we are deprived of something good when we do not. The effects of this constant noise and distraction are deeper and even more ominous. It is not as if the sacred were a luxury we can turn to if we are so inclined, an optional good thing. Rather, a sense of the sacred is necessary if we are to become truly human, and we are

twisted away from what we are meant to be when we ignore the sacred. Although too much emphasis can be put on felt experience, where prayer and the Christian life are concerned, we must have an experience of the sacred to really be able to believe in it, and it can't be experienced without the kind of prayer that can be born only in silence.

*February 24, 2006*