



The Cardinal Read

Lead, Kindly Light

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EDITORIAL TEAM

Editor-in-Chief

LIAM FARRER

Managing Editors

HANA DOCK

CAPUCINE TOSI

Editors

CECILIA GILLIS

ALEC LANDRY

The Cardinal Read is a Catholic magazine founded in 2024 by the Newman Centre of McGill University. Our magazine wishes to offer a cultural platform inviting students and other young professionals to share their works related to various themes of Catholic culture.

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DEAREST CARDINAL READERS,

As we enter Ordinary Time, having witnessed and experienced the great joys of Paschaltide, we are happy to announce the inaugural issue of *The Cardinal Read*, named in honour of Saint John Henry Cardinal Newman and literary puns. This issue is specifically dedicated, in loving memory, to Prof. Patricia O'Rourke, a dear friend of the Newman Centre of McGill University and former member of The Newman Rambler Editorial Board. *Ar dhuís Dé go raibí a hánam.* May her soul be at the right hand of God.

The publication of this magazine was a long process – thank all those who were involved for their immense patience – but a most gratifying one, as we learned to bring together works of the mind and the heart, in our desire to encompass both the power of the intellect and the creativity of the soul.

The Cardinal Read, while primarily student-focused, is a magazine that wishes to offer a cultural platform inviting students and other young professionals to share their works related to various subjects and themes of Catholic culture. This can take many forms which include, but are not limited to reviews, opinion pieces, short stories, poetry, art, and photography.

Opening our Easter 2024 issue are two poems by Father Emmanuel Isidore Umanah, a Nigerian Catholic Priest and doctoral student in the Faculty of Canon Law at the Pontifical Urbaniana University in Rome. *Leafless not lifeless* is a prose poem about the power of life to bear hope even where hopelessness seems to prevail while *A Priest's Pledge* is a versified poem expressing one's sacred promise to live and die for Christ.

In *The Oblate by Huysmans, an Artist Between Beauty and Devadence*, Capucine Tosi, a Master's student at the McGill University's School of Religious Studies, invites us to explore the imaginative and complex mind of a French novelist from the second half of the 19th century, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and how his later works reflect a sensibility for Benedictine spirituality.

Anthony Lombardi, a McGill student graduating in History and Religious Studies, who had the opportunity to travel to Portugal for World Youth Day 2023, shares a series of pictures with a personal anecdote and reflection on his trip in his *Memories of World Youth Day*.

M. S. is a Catholic translator and writer who is currently working on a collection of prose poetry about martyrs. In *The Reverent*, she draws us under the skin of the plight of

martyrdom thanks to intense, abstracted prose, which leaves one with a sense of redemptive suffering.

In *Faith as Love's Catastrophe*, Thomas Labentresse, a rising senior majoring in Political Science at Concordia University, presents a commentary on Seamus Heaney's "St Kevin and the Blackbird," a poem highlighting the transition from pain to love as we receive faith from God.

Finally, closing up the issue is *God and the Machine*, a short story by Adam Dzwowareczak, a nihilist and freelance scientific editor. He tells the story of a Benedictine monk's struggle in a hyper-advanced technological world and which ends with a message of hope for reconciliation of humanity with modernity.

We hope our readers will truly enjoy going over this first issue, and that this yearly publication can become a new tradition in which many will come to partake. This mission, of course, we entrust to Saint Luke, the patron saint of our magazine, and to Our Lady, Mother of the Word. Enjoy!

Lead, Kindly Light,
The Cardinal Read Editor(s) Team

LEAFLESS NOT LIFELESS

FATHER EMMANUEL UMANAH

Because she was *leafless*, the patient sun seemed useless. She had no chloroplast to photosynthesize such kindness, except the naked branches – that could not even house a hummingbird – awaiting to be fortunately fetched and chopped for fire. Gone were those green days, when she could dauntlessly dance to the heavy drumming of the mid-latitudes' wind without wearing a shabby look. She was the winter's victim.

Because she was *leafless*, every bird felt unsafe, leaving her lonely to the wicked winter that defaced her. But time tells the story differently: she was watchfully waiting for who would discover the life in her. Winter withered her leaves, leaving her alive, but leafless; the daily snowfall masked her branches with brief beauty, that disappeared at each appearance of sunrays. Her dreamt days were delayed with temptations of despair.

Because she was *leafless*, she was buried before dying, sentenced without trial, forgotten before dawn... What a life of hopeless hope! And here lies the difference: hopeless hope! The story of a treeless leaf is different from the hope of a leafless tree: it is better to be a clothesless winter tree – stripped of youthfulness – than a yellow autumn leaf – left without roots. The winter tree is never hopeless.

Because she was not *lifeless*, the first droplets from the sky aroused her smiles, surprising some past perchers and passers-by with sprouting shoots. Her bracing beauty left no bird unseduced, not even an aging eagle. She mothered many features: fresh shades with many guests, lanceolate leaves with green pigment, sweet scents silently swimming in the cold breeze ... Winter is gone!

Because she was not *lifeless*, she resisted a viral virus in her vicinity, while waiting for her priceless spring. Her wedding with the April guest changed the world like the meeting of Divinity and Humanity in Nazareth. Spring alone is enough to wake the winter tree.

Because she was not *lifeless*, she could generate life again and again. Her third day had come, like the Easter Day of Christians, after forty days of leaflessness. Her faithful branches were rewarded with fresh fruits for their patience; for they remained in the winter tree, and the winter tree in them.



LEAFLESS NOT LIFELESS

Photography by Father Emmanuel Isidore Umanah



THE REVENANT

M.S.

And you staggered on as the Urchin Guard, not indestructible but divisible, ghastly-golden pale, wreaking havoc in the heart of the cruel immovable Emperor who would not be betrayed, who would not be delayed in his fury. In your Praetorian days you extended your sidereal mirth, with sempiternal ambition and eternal devotion you spoke of your Firmament, capturing the twins that looked in your eyes and threatened to enter the aching chamber underneath their bare feet. Shouting you clung to their wavering robes, haunted by the threefold divinity that devoured your bones, and you prophesied, prophesied, prophesied. Oh, you could smell the reeking tomb of resignation, you could feel on your skin the dampness of doubt: "You are not wise; despair with us and feel whole." How many souls did you pluck from the ashes, how many cups of black tar did you empty over their bending rods? When your flesh rubbed against the dried bark, you lifted your gaze and examined the sky while leather-gloved fingers pulled on drawstrings ahead. Plague arrows burrowed into your body, tore holes into your tensioned muscles that glowed and droned with incandescent holiness. What is the length of monstrous patience, the depth of cosmic faith? How do you wait for the promised treasury when each new shaft finds its way through your organs and reveals the great wasteland? Hearing the Mauritanian archers snicker, you gasped for air, exceedingly weary, ready to kiss the barbed crown. Waiting to be compassed with the promised shield in your dreams. But you awoke coughing out moths in the house of the Roman widow, the froth of your death dissolving with each breath. On the stairwell he beheld you in horror, the persecutor astonished. "Did my Goddess not sever the thread?" he cried, and you wept with him in unison. "Diocletian, Diocletian, why do you thirst in your hatred?" A harvest of flowers bloomed in your tear duct, releasing its fragrance as you pleaded for the marble obelisk to turn to porous matter. Inflamed and ablaze, his incredulous brain did not, could not perceive the glinting arrows in your body: "Shall you now haunt me, infernal shade? What is this second sacrifice, with which you taunt me?" A smile stretched out like the Pudus across your face but no secrets were revealed. Opening your arms, you only welcomed your fate. Not to arise, but to be clubbed into the ground; not to live, but to moisten the earth with your ardent blood; not to convince your condemner, but to imprint on his retina the image of your zeal forever.

FAITH AS LOVE'S CATALYST

THOMAS LATENDRESSE

"St Kevin and the Blackbird"
by Seamus Heaney

And then there was St Kevin and the blackbird.
The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside
His cell, but the cell is narrow, so
One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
And lays in it and settles down to nest.
Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
Into the network of eternal life,
Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time
From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth
Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,
'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays,
A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.

Heaney, Seamus, 1996. "St Kevin and the Blackbird,"
in *The Spirit Level*. London: Faber and Faber.

This poem stumped me when I first read it. In so few lines, Seamus Heaney presents a compelling interpretation of our connection to God, the natural world, and earthly burdens. But the poem seems irreconcilably simple. It describes one man, Saint Kevin of Glendalough, losing his sense of self when a blackbird nests in his outstretched palm. The diction is relaxed, the approach is relatable, and the telling is clear. At the heart of this feigned simplicity is the poem's remarkable structure, whose subtleties give the reader lyrical access to Saint Kevin's spiritual transformation.

Four equal parts make up the poem: two halves subdivided into two sections. The first half recounts the tale of a blackbird nesting in Saint Kevin's palm. The second half breaks the fourth wall, entertaining – and dismissing – reasonable concerns about the story's feasibility.

The beginning of the first half presents Saint Kevin in hermetic prayer, fervent in his attempts to connect with God. The corresponding structure is enjambed and crowded, and its overflowing lines convey Saint Kevin's ill-at-ease disposition as he prays in a cell too cramped for both arms.

Despite the well-guided intentions of Saint Kevin's prayers, divine revelation rarely comes through an expected medium. God sees Saint Kevin's discomfort and presents Himself as a delicate animal, a mother searching for home. From having arms "stiff / As a crossbeam" to holding his hand "like a branch," the bird's nesting literally recasts Saint Kevin as a cradle for fledgling life. It shakes him from his isolation and throws him into the great and natural *dependence* of our world.

This is the fundamental tension of Saint Kevin's story: a bird nesting is as commonplace as it is the most remarkable, awe-inspiring, speechlessness-inducing, miraculous miracle imaginable. It embodies the interdependence of being and the marvelously complex yet crystalline layers that God's world harbours ad infinitum. It is God's omnipresence in a natural world we often take for granted, if not exploit. It is the miracle of life.

Heaney promptly replaces this revelation with inquiry's creeping doubt. The second half of this poem breaks the fourth wall when the narrator concedes that "the whole thing's imagined anyhow." This surprising split, coupling text and interpretation, reveals Heaney's overarching form: this piece is a homily in poetic form.

The admitted fiction deepens the impact of the story's message. While the miracle's

of holy people often overshadow their basic mortality, the narrator questions Saint Kevin's humanity directly. The audience is asked to question what exactly they just read (How unbelievable was that?). While common sense dictum suggests that a bird nesting in your palm for weeks is as miraculous as it should be physically agonizing. These questions emphasize Saint Kevin's reinvention by refusing it. Saint Kevin's tenderness is not miraculous despite his humanity, but because of it.

The truths thrust upon Saint Kevin are, fortunately for us, thrust upon Laureate of the Nobel Prize for Literature Seamus Heaney as well. Heaney wields the poem's structure to capture and convey Saint Kevin's transfiguration. The first half, focused on Saint Kevin, begins with his discomfort, and finishes with his new clear-eyed generosity. The second half, focused on the reader, begins with contrarian logic, and finishes by divulging the spiritual truths that render it moot. Each half mirrors the other. From confusion to transcendence, their subdivisions align in message and depart in subject. Reader and Saint undergo the same transformation.

The audience-directed questions are both reasonable and fallacious, a duality symptomatic of the ambivalence of the blackbird's arrival. Faith is the ultimate differentiator and the nexus of Saint Kevin's revelation. He could not have known, without faith, whether the blackbird was a gift or a condemnation. Faith allowed Saint Kevin to overcome the pains of his newfound artificiality and instilled in him a sense of obligation, that he "must hold his hand" instead of shooing the bird away. Faith was the precondition of and catalyst for his change.

Faith, as the mirrored structure dictates, is just as vital to the reader's fulfillment. The existential truths we seek saturate our daily lives. Heaney suggests, and the only difference between us and Saint Kevin is the faith to recognize them when they land in the palm of our hand.

THE OBLATE BY HUYSMANS, AN ARTIST BETWEEN BEAUTY AND DECADENCE

CAPUCINE TOSI



Portrait of Joris-Karl Huysmans
by Jean-François Raffaëlli

Among the great literary converts of the last century's Catholic revival, Joris-Karl Huysmans is a crucial French figure. Overtaken by seasonal blues, I resolved to dive in the monstrous beauty that is so specific to his work, a sort of synthesis between Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé. Faithful to his methodological backwardness, I started with the end: the last book of his conversion series of a character named Durtal. After *The Oblate*, published in 1903, I walked my way back to *À Rebours*, published in 1884.

Both pieces seem remarkably close to the author's personal life as Huysmans usually steered clear from stories imagined from scratch. *À Rebours* follows the lethargic

life of Des Esseintes, a rich young man affected by *le mal-du-siècle*, a popular cocktail of disgust, emptiness and apathy, while *The Oblate* relates the Benedictine life of a not-so-new convert as French monasteries are forced into exile. More than the sheer vastness of Huysmans' expertise on various forms of art and on obscure historical and liturgical facts, what struck me was the utter honesty of a man who has been through all the stages of conversion: misplaced hopes, hitting rock-bottom, illumination, extreme zeal, slow changes, and finally making peace with an old self who is taking a long time to die .

In the character of Durtal, we find the perfect opposite of Des Esseintes, and yet, we sense that our convert was once that very aimless man as well. On one side, we find the decadent artist, living a life of extreme refinement to the point of sickness and folly, on the other, the humbled writer seeking balance between a simple monastic routine and the flexibility to follow his inspirations in a world set on destroying both. However, the ghost of Des Esseintes is never too far off from a Durtal prone to discouragement and melancholy, especially as he is challenged by an unstable political context and a seemingly deceiving Church.

Furthermore, as *A Rebours* constitutes an encyclopedic novel allowing Huysmans to expand in numberless commentaries on topics such as the writings of Antiquity, the paintings of Gustave Moreau, and the art of botany, so *The Oblate* represents an opportunity for our author to share in depth his vision of Benedictine spirituality. It has been said that the Catholic imagination is liturgically formed and informed, and there is in Huysmans a great illustration of this argument. Indeed, the charism of the Order of Saint Benedict is often thought to be the liturgy, or divine praise. While Huysmans gladly accepts this definition, he also proposes as a particularly Benedictine mission the renewal of Catholic art. This, he would argue, is only the logical progression flowing from a love for the beauty, the details, and the history of a living and breathing liturgy.

For Benedictines, the divine praise offered to God through psalms, hymns, and canticles, is translated in the idea of *le luxe pour Dieu* which is then echoed in countless crafts, from viticulture and gastronomy to architecture and manuscript illumination. The slow and steady refinement over centuries of the most minute tasks such as gardening, cooking, writing, or sewing, effectuated by countless religious men and women absorbed in the prayerful praise of the Most Holy Trinity led to the creation of masterpieces transpiring with divine beauty. This is partly how Western monasticism played such an important role in the building of European civilization, and it could also be why Catholicism still has a great part to play in elevating modern culture.

Moreover, there is a cosmic dimension to divine praise which is evident in most monasteries: birds, dogs, horses, carrots, cabbages, and stars all seem caught up in universal worship, as the monks and nuns give them a voice with which to thank God. For a man like Huysmans, overwhelmed by inharmonious sights and sounds, such a reconciliation of all things could only be deeply moving. And while we recognize that, as fallen humans, the struggle for peace continues within the self, the monastery, the city, and the nation, we also find with Durtal the way to keep going: humility and gratitude in a true obedience to the will of God, revealed to us through the unpretending present moment. The variety of temperaments and idiosyncrasies in the monks, the afflictions of disease, unjust laws, Church politics gone sour, and small-town drama all become bearable as our protagonist learns to forgive and follow Christ on the often unimpressive way to self-emptying. Yet as a warning for overenthusiastic believers who would expect to embrace the Cross in one second, Huysmans reminds us that the way, even in the cloister, is often long-suffering. *"Il faut souffrir pour arriver et souffrir encore lorsque l'on arrive."*

To conclude, I will not deny that Huysmans can at times be a challenging author, encouraging us to exercise the patience he is evoking by being prone to descriptions and digressions. However, any lover of art and liturgy will find in him a friend, maybe disagreeing with his criticisms more in a while, but only doing so with the sense of respect due to those with whom we differ in matters of taste only. For those interested in a renewal of Catholic art and in what truly constitutes the Catholic imagination, Huysmans will prove to be a mentor, possibly a visionary. And who knows, he may also inspire a few with the simple joy of living under the rule of a spiritual Father so simply discreet, balanced, and straightforward as Saint Benedict!

A PRIEST'S PLEDGE

FATHER EMMANUEL UMANAH

I want to be a priest
Because He wants me one,
But I know I'm the least
Among those He has won.

I want to be a priest
Where it's almost a crime,
To be there in their midst
I don't care about the time.

I want to be a priest
And give to Him my best,
And through the Eucharist
Extinguish the world's quest.

I want to be a priest
In my words and my deeds,
I want to die a priest
Preaching and sowing seeds.

I want to be a priest
And also be broken,
As the Bread for our feast
Until I'm all eaten.

I want to be a priest
Trusting in the Lord's Grace,
Till the heavenly feast
Where I shall see His face.

MEMORIES OF WORLD YOUTH DAY, LISBOA, 2023

ANTHONY LOMBARDI

"Non tener miedo!" "Be not afraid!" This was an outstanding message from Pope Francis concluding the World Youth Day festival on August 9, 2023, in Lisbon's *Parque de Tejo*. His words summarise the intent of these events: an affirmative and growing experience in one's faith. In a world characterised by the decline of Christianity in the West, it is a message that many needed to hear to inspire a revitalisation of the faith, as we face modern challenges. Together, with friends from Montreal, we lived an eye-opening two-week stay surrounded by the vibrant Catholic culture of Portugal.



Sé de Lisboa

We partook in many faith-sharing experiences, activities, and events such as daily mass, conferences, games, and worship. The culmination of the festival was most impactful, with its gathering of over a million people from everywhere around the world and the special time spent with Christ's own Vicar.

After experiencing the grandeur of Rome beforehand, World Youth Day in Portugal provided a modest counterpart with the quaint size of its city, its church architecture and the overall single day to day encounters that show how faith transcends time and place through everyday experiences. One example of this relates to a photo accepted to this inaugural issue of *Cardinal Read*. It is the *Sé de Lisboa* cathedral, originally built in the 13th century, that is located right across from a shrine on the birthplace of my patron saint, Anthony of Padua (born Fernando Martins de Bulhões). I realized that growing up beneath the shadow of this cathedral must have influenced Saint Anthony's early life and helped him become one of the holiest men of his time and among the most venerated saints. In the World Youth Day context, this provides an example of integrating faith, without fear, into one's daily life to be on fire for the love of God and His Word.

PHOTOS OF ROME

ANTHONY LOMBARDI



Church of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza



Madonna della Pietà by Michelangelo

GOD AND THE MACHINE

ADAM PYWOWARCZUK

Brother Isidore quickly shot to attention upon hearing the harsh beeping of his alarm. Gingerly throwing off his bedsheets, he twisted his body and once again began to climb out of his bed. Before his feet had touched the ground, he said a short prayer under his breath, the same one he offered every morning: "Heavenly Father, I offer myself to You this day to do with me what You will. Just for today remove my defects of character that I may be a better witness to You and a better agent of Your will, through Christ our Lord. Amen."

The feel of his bare feet on the cold metal floor of his cell helped shock him out of his initial grogginess. Taking advantage of his weightlessness, he kicked off of the floor and began to slowly glide towards his beeping alarm to shut it off. He grabbed hold of one of the many handlebars placed around his cell to help steady himself, then pressed the button to turn on the lights and continued with the rest of his morning routine. Retrieving his habit from the trunk at the foot of his bed, he began to remove his pajamas and vest himself. He recited the usual vesting prayer, finishing with an 'amen' as he adjusted his habit. Still conscious of his schedule, he glanced at the clock on the wall. Two more minutes before Matins.

Leisurely moving towards the computer console at the opposite side of his cell, he retrieved his tablet from the charging station and opened up his breviary, and once his digital clock displayed the right time he began his prayers. While chanting the psalms, Isidore kept his voice low; partly because he had never been very confident in his singing voice, partly because of the poor acoustics in his cell, but mostly because singing them all on his own felt a little strange. All of the other members of his community were working off of the same schedule, so in a sense they were praying together, but the feeling of solitude put something of a damper on his enjoyment. He would never skip the Offices, of course, but they were starting to feel more and more like a chore.

As he continued his recitation, Isidore's eyes kept drifting to the side, sneaking peeks at the small collection of objects floating around in his cell. He had left a few icons and even a large painted crucifix suspended in the air, still somewhat enthralled by the

gimmick of weightlessness. Mounting them to the wall in some way had also proven to be enough of a challenge that he had judged it to be not worth the effort. In addition to these distractions, his eyes were being pulled towards the view outside of the small window in his cell. Through the reinforced glass, he could very clearly see the surface of the Earth. He had been told that he was whizzing by at speeds far beyond his comprehension, but looking at how the landscape moved by always made him feel like he was just slowly inching along. It was a breathtaking sight any day, but this time Isidore's attention was drawn by the fact that he appeared to be orbiting over his home country. There was a brief sense of homesickness as he looked down through the window at the familiar mountains. Though the landscape was very recognisable, at this great distance he was completely unable to make out the small village where he had come from. He had already been up here in his 'cell,' in reality a small spacecraft orbiting the Earth, for several months now. This was his community's attempt at reproducing the life of Saint Anthony the Great, albeit with a few compromises on the canonical aspects; the use of the internet was permitted to allow hermits to maintain a connection with community life. Isidore was less than halfway through his year in the 'desert' of space, but he had already become very comfortable with his adjusted routine.

Concluding his prayers with the usual blessing, he then checked to see what the Scripture reading for today was. After identifying the verses to read, he quickly closed the brevity app on his tablet and pressed the button to open up his app for the Bible. Sifting through the list of chapters before finally locating the 15th Psalm. Isidore's eyes began to scan the screen, trying to absorb as much information as he could as his finger slowly dragged the scroll bar down towards the bottom of the page. "They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears but do not hear; noses but do not smell. They have hands but do not feel; feet but do not walk; they make no sound in their throats. Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them."

Isidore closed his Bible as soon as he had finished the reading. Next, there was to be a short period of reflection prior to their community discussion. Reflection on what?

The meaning of this passage was fairly clear to him. It was yet another condemnation of idolatry, fairly typical of the Old Testament, in very familiar language. Isidore decided that he would simply leave a comment saying just that. This was only a formality, but to him it was also important to not be the first one to post a comment. If he commented first, it would draw too much attention to him and steer the course of the rest of the discussion. Posting last, on the other hand, gave the impression of laziness or hesitation. This didn't suit him either, so he always tried to post somewhere in the middle.

Before he could turn on his computer, he had to recite the Litany of Saint Isidore of Seville. It was a long prayer pleading for the intercession of his patron, asking for safety in using the internet and protection from the temptations within. Beyond the obvious kinds of sites, all of which were strictly blocked on all devices belonging to his community, there were all manner of trite distractions, gossip, and scandals contained in the continuously churning deluge of information that made up the internet. There was a certain spirit that seemed to animate any digital environment, as if the very nature of being online shaped the substance of whatever could be found there. It was important to be wary of these spirits which prowled about the world wide web, seeking the ruin of souls.

Having finished his litany, Isidore signed in to his community's group chat. After waiting for a minute or so, he was happy to see that Brother Thomas, always eager, had finally broken the ice and started posting a series of comments on today's verse. "I think it is very interesting to reflect on how the ancient Israelites viewed idolatry in light of the kind we face today," his first comment began. "The idols of the Canaanites were statues that could not speak, hear, or see; in our era, however, I feel like we are surrounded by machines who are capable of doing all of these things."

"Would that make them not idols, then? No, I would say they are still idols. And all the more dangerous because we do not recognize them as such."

Thomas continued in a second comment, with other elaborations seemingly on the way. "We've come to rely on machines to the point where we have built them to perform tasks that our ancient brothers would have identified with life, but this artificial life is not the same as the life lived by God when he became man to be with us in the person of Jesus Christ."

"We must be able to recognize what a true life lived in participation with God is, and that if it is unavoidable for us to live with these machines, then we must be sure to remain their masters. They cannot be allowed to occupy our hearts." Prayer emojis and other reactions started to fill up the chat in response to his comments. Many other brothers were responding, creating long threads under his comments, while still others were posting their own thoughts as well.

Isidore didn't bother reading the thread under Thomas' comments, but left a quick reaction as he began typing his own post, finally comfortable that he wasn't jumping in too early. After making his post, he also left a reaction on Brother Benedict's shorter comment: "I am especially struck by 'Those who make them are like them.' Did we build these machines in our own image? Or are we starting to become more and more like the machines as we let them into our lives? Persevere in prayer, brothers." Seeing that the activity in the chat was slowing down, and that some brothers were already posting waving emojis, Isidore felt that he had contributed enough to satisfy his superiors and signed out of the group chat for the day.

The use of the internet done for now, Isidore moved to shut down his browser and eat his morning meal. As he was about to close it, the sight of a recommended article on his homepage stuck out to him. He remembered the library, and the pleas for proper discipline and custody of the eyes, but after checking the clock and reminding himself that he was ahead on his work and could get away with a later breakfast, he convinced himself that he had time to read one article. Maybe even two.

Clicking on the link, he was immediately appalled by its contents, as he had suspected he would be from the headline. From there, there were even more scandalous recommendations that he couldn't help but click on. He could spare five minutes, he thought to himself as he opened the next article. This seemingly rational part of his brain was quickly overwhelmed by anger, then sorrow at the state of things. He read another report about how the cities were becoming more and more empty, populated only by the dwindling minority of professionals who had the skills to manage the increasingly self-reliant systems that ran the world economy. More funding for education was proposed as a solution, but as the university was increasingly seen as an investment rather than a place of learning, it could only serve to churn out more cogs for the bureaucratic apparatus. And of course, it was becoming increasingly clear that computers simply made better bureaucrats. All our needs could be provided for by the complex system which had been set up, they said; but then what were the rest of us to do? Out of work, most of the population could no longer afford to live in the cities and were forced to strike out elsewhere. But where?

Another article discussed the most recent expansion of euthanasia's legislation, seemingly in answer to the previous article's question. The courts, ostensibly still run by human judges but increasingly reliant on the use of artificial intelligence to analyse and comment on lengthy legal texts, had ruled that it was legal for the bodies of the euthanised to be broken down at the atomic level and used as raw material. Carbon could be made into artificial diamonds for cutting tools and mining equipment, nitrogen was useful for fertilizer, and whatever hydrogen they could extract could be used for clean fuel cells. All of this was done with the patient's consent of course; the argument for the case hinged on the right to privacy and bodily autonomy. With this new legislation, the price tag on a dead body had now become even bigger, so the algorithm that managed the health care system was more likely to recommend euthanasia to the growing sector of the population unable to remain 'productive' under the new system.

The upper class didn't seem to be faring very well either, the next article seemed to indicate. Even the ones that weren't being phased out by the merciless march of progress were reporting skyrocketing rates of addiction and sexually transmitted diseases. Increasingly bizarre accidents and crimes were also popping up in all sorts of headlines. With so much time on their hands, they were struggling to find any sense of purpose. And to top it all off, another article seemed puzzled about why they were seeing higher rates of suicide and plummeting birth rates, seemingly with no hint of self-awareness. The charts were all up, after all. Every measure of human prosperity was trending higher than it had ever been, according to their models.

Before Isidore finally closed his browser, realizing that his five minutes had long passed, he caught sight of another recommended article. The article, seemingly just an ad presenting itself as journalism in order to pass through any filters, boasted a headline which exalted the virtues of the latest entertainment product. Isidore couldn't tell if it was a television serial, a movie, or a book, but based on the description it just appeared to be a remix of a bunch of different ideas from several previous entertainment products, seemingly created to check off a series of boxes on a list of consumer preferences for maximum marketability. Isidore was fairly certain that this product was pitched by an algorithm, but he couldn't figure out if the algorithm was being run by a computer or a human who happened to be following the same routine unconsciously. He wasn't sure which possibility disturbed him more.

Finally freeing himself from gazing into the abyss, Isidore turned his eyes towards the window of his cell. He was once again facing the surface of the Earth, but this time looking at a different continent. For some reason the sense of warmth that he had felt from seeing his home earlier had vanished. Gazing at the surface of the Earth from this far up really drove home just how alone he was, but he was starting to feel like that might not be such a bad thing.

Looking down at the Earth, instead of a ball teeming with life, he now saw a cold, mechanical engine; endlessly churning away, seemingly indifferent to all the interchangeable gears working away in its gullet. As small and cramped as it was, his cell felt like an oasis in the mechanised desert. He was up here with his icons and his books, free from all the chaos that he had just been reading about. But Isidore couldn't help but frown as he thought this. He wanted to say this was true, but it didn't really feel true.

Having decided that he had already wasted enough time, he resolved to finally start his daily work, even if it meant skipping breakfast. He had never found his massive stash of freeze-dried meals particularly appetising, and he felt like his stomach could hold out until lunch. Opening up the appropriate application on his computer, he promptly received scanned copies of all the documents he was to be working on today. His community was primarily engaged in the restoration and cataloguing of old manuscripts, icons, artwork, and other miscellaneous sacramentals. While the brothers on Earth continued their work maintaining the physical objects in their vast collection, those within the 'desert' were tasked with cataloguing and transcribing scans from books and other texts. Yesterday, he had been in the middle of a particularly interesting book, and the pages that had been sent to him for today looked to be very interesting as well. However, try as he might, Isidore just couldn't keep his mind focused on his work. Whenever he was looking over a page, within a few sentences his mind would drift to the outrageous things that he had been reading earlier. The devil had been able to get his hooks into Isidore with that one careless click earlier, and although the young monk thought he had pulled the thorn out of his flesh, the wound still stung.

Finally resigning to a break after only about a page and a half of work, he leaned back in his chair and thought. Things were going really badly, and he was once again grateful to be free from all of it. The humans on Earth had seemingly lost the will to live, following the promises of more efficient machines until they had willingly made themselves obsolete.

They were so dazzled by the promise of certainty and material prosperity that they let a series of systems and algorithms run their lives, and rubicidally followed all of their commands. It was promised that, as technology advanced, the machines would become more human. To Isidore, however, it seemed like humans were becoming more like machines instead.

He thought about this with some smug satisfaction, but there was something nagging at him in the back of his mind. He began to think of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Who was he to be so self-assured? Well, I'm not following some mechanistic

routine designed to optimize efficiency. He thought to himself. Just as he considered that, however, an image of his itinerary flashed into his mind. It was the same schedule that all of the members of his community were obliged to follow, as per their vows. Day after day, week after week. Isidore could feel himself getting a bit flustered. That's very different, he assured himself. The Rule is not from a machine algorithm, but from God. But doesn't it come from Saint Benedict? something seemed to whisper in his head. The small doubts and questions that had been haunting him were now cohering as a single voice, presenting a clear rebuke of Isidore's own failings.

Isidore wasn't sure how to respond. Part of him knew a voice like this could only be a sign of no good, but another part of him was deeply disturbed by his inability to answer it. He knew not to argue with the devil, but to dismantle these objections would be the same as the computers that ignore data outside of their parameters, right? He started to feel doubt creep in. Was his faith predicated on similar preconceptions? Was this just another routine that he was set in, much like the people on Earth?

It's true that his monastic lifestyle comes from the Rule, but the purpose was to order his life towards God. It wasn't a case of mere efficiency, and in some cases it was intentionally the opposite. But are we not simply comparing one set of rules to another here? The voice seemed persistent.

The algorithm and the Abbot may have different ends, but do they not employ similar means? Obedience is obedience, regardless of what is obeyed.

Isidore began to imagine God as an engineer operating a great big machine. All of creation expanded and contracted rhythmically, all of its parts moving with precision. Hooded monks moved swiftly through the hallways of their monastery, like electrons through a circuit board. Arriving at their chapel, they all promptly got out their rosaries and began to pray. With each Hail Mary a counter increased by one, and once it had reached ten the counter reset. Each time the first counter reset a second one started counting towards five, and Isidore's head began to spin.

This picture would not leave him, mostly because he struggled to articulate why it felt so wrong. He knew this wasn't true, but he couldn't find an answer to the challenge within his own experiences. That steady lifeless precision, like clockwork, seemed to haunt him even up here. He had run away from the machine, only to apparently find himself part of another machine.

Having completely forgotten his work, he began to frantically look around his cell, as if the answer could be found somewhere on the blank walls. Seeing nothing but cold metal surrounding him, he closed his eyes and uttered a small prayer. It wasn't something he had memorized from a book this time, but simply an earnest plea with no fixed formula. Please, he muttered to himself. *Please find it on my own.*

As soon as that thought poured through his mind, his eyes snapped open, seemingly at random. To his surprise, Isidore found himself face-to-face with another man. The man's eyes were turned downward, filled with deep sorrow and some other indescribable but profound emotion. It took Isidore a second to realize that the blood-streaked face he was looking at was from his large painted crucifix, which had slowly drifted over to his chair. He continued to stare deeply at the painted figure of his Lord, not just at the wounds all over his body, but at the expression on His face.

Isidore's mind began to wander back in time, to when Christ was carrying His Cross. He was walking along a specific path, to a specific destination, to complete a specific goal. He already knew ahead of time what was to happen and what He was to do, much as an artificial intelligence works with specific parameters and a particular goal in mind. But as He walked, carrying His heavy burden, there was none of the rigidity of the mechanical movements which filled Isidore's mind. He continued to stare deep into His eyes, and he could almost feel something welling up in him. An emotion, but also some kind of new understanding: an understanding of the importance of the 'why' and the 'how,' over the 'what.'

Waking from his reverie, Isidore caught sight of the digital clock on his wall; he was supposed to be starting his daily Rosary soon. He had already fallen very behind on his work for the day, having squandered much of the morning, but it was nothing that would be impossible to make up in the afternoon. Reaching over to his heads and grabbing hold of them, Isidore started reciting the familiar prayers he had said every day for as long as he could remember. This time, however, something was different. He spoke very deliberately and slowly, letting the words not just dance on his tongue but spring forth from his heart. He was saying the same words, but now he said them with a new feeling behind them. The haze he had been in over the past few days seemed to slowly lift away, leaving a sense of relief. With each call to his Blessed Mother, Isidore could almost feel tears coming to his eyes. Feeling newly invigorated, he was surprised and disappointed to find that he had already come to the end of the Rosary. In confusion, he went to see if he hadn't skipped a decade somewhere, but checking his beads again and looking at the clock finally convinced him that he had indeed finished the whole prayer. It seemed to go by so much quicker this time, as if a chore had now become a cherished hobby.

The community schedule called for midday prayer to start immediately after finishing the Rosary, but before opening up his breviary he stole another glance out his window. Looking down at the surface of the Earth again, he felt his isolation that much more strongly. He had come into space as an escape from Earth, seeing nothing left here to love.

As always, the green and blue planet in his small window was still filled with motion, but now he started to see it with different eyes. Before, he could only see cold and rigid undulations, but now he noticed something different underneath it all. Though still under the burden of the rhythmic beating of pistons, there seemed to be a slightly uneven pulse quivering through the ground; like a wounded beast drawing ragged breaths. From within that cage, there were still signs of life, and where there was life, there was hope.

Isikire took a quick look at the date on his tablet. He knew he still had more than six months up here, a deadline he had long been dreading, but for the first time he felt desperate for that time to pass. The sense of security in his cell was now replaced by a desire for companionship, a longing to go out into the world and to be with his brothers again. While he began reciting his prayers, his voice booming with enthusiasm as never before, he noticed the corners of his mouth curling up into a smile as his eyes kept glancing out the window.

Will be back soon, he whispered between antiphons. Will be back soon.

THE END

ABOUT US

The Newman Centre of McGill University, founded in 1897 and located in downtown Montréal, constitutes a crossroads between faith and intellectual life at the heart of the university. The idea of our magazine was born on the day of Saint Luke, both patron saint of artists and our very own, as we aspire to paint the world with words.



Liam Farrer

is the Director of the Newman Centre. He is completing his PhD in Theological Studies at the Regis-St. Michael's Faculty of Theology at the Toronto School of Theology in the University of Toronto.

Hana Dock

is in her Master's in French Literature at McGill University. She is currently working on François de Fénelon's pedagogical works for her thesis, and generally holds a keen interest in 17th century religious literature.

Capucine Tosi

is finishing her Master's thesis in Religious Studies at McGill University. She studies Marian apparitions and wishes to continue her investigation of Catholic mysticism and how it influences pop culture.

Cecilia Gillis

completed her Bachelor's Degree in Political Science with two Minors in European Literature and French Literature at McGill University. Her favorite Catholic author is Graham Greene, and she is generally interested in how literature and religion connect.

Alec Landry

is a 4th year Student at McGill Completing a Major in Economics and a Minor in Religious Studies. His favorite writer is the great English "prince of Paradox", G.K.Chesterton.

PRAYER TO SAINT LUKE

Lord God,
who chose Saint Luke
to write and paint the face
of your love for humanity,

Grant that those
who desire to see your beauty
may live as one heart and one soul
and that all may come to the beatific vision.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.

Amen.