While many modern thinkers have difficulties with Catholic and Christian faith because of the concept of eternal damnation, I’ve always thought salvation equally problematic because of its everlastingness. As a child I remember clearly being both puzzled and frightened when trying to think of the prospect of living forever, even with the hope of being in God’s presence. Nor am I alone. A 2016 article at The Atlantic discusses apeirophobia, not officially recognized by any edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Disorders—but certainly recognized by a large number of people throughout history, not limited to the author of the article, those on Facebook, and those answering surveys on Reddit. The article cites Blaise Pascal’s record in the Pensées of his own terror at the thought of a seemingly
infinite space and an everlasting time: “When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened, and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then.”

Though the *Atlantic* article toys with a number of psychological explanations for this fear of eternity, it doesn’t really come to any conclusions about the fear other than that for the author, as for many adults, the solution to the problem seems to be not thinking about it. Of course the difficulty with this “solution” is that if the human being was made in the image of God and meant to live on forever in a resurrected state, ignorance in this case may be insufficient for bliss in the long—meaning everlasting—term. God has not only made “everything beautiful in its time,” the Preacher tells us in Ecclesiastes, but he has also “put eternity in man’s mind” (3:11). Eternity, that vast abyss of time that seems to the apeirophobic—let us say “human being”—so terrifying, is terrifying not merely because it is hard to grasp, but also because it is part of the nature of God.

As a boy I remember vividly the Pascalian night terrors I had of time and space simultaneously growing more vast and distant and yet somehow crushing in on me at the same time. It was only later that I came to associate this experience with God. In Jean Daniélou’s marvelous little book *God’s Life in Us*, the twentieth-century Jesuit wrote of God’s omnipresence throughout the universe he created, a presence called fittingly “immensity.” This immensity of God’s presence comes to us as a mystery, meaning not “that there is something unintelligible in God. On the contrary, it is because of his fullness that we find it impossible to support him.”

We come gradually to the ability to support the mysterious immensity of God’s presence by a process of purification of soul that is itself the work of God. Daniélou cites St. Irenaeus’s notion that the
process of growing into a capacity for God is a trinitarian work in which the Spirit takes hold of us and gives us to the Son, who then presents us to the Father. Yet allowing ourselves to be taken hold of and cast into the immensity of divine life is a difficult process. Our task in prayer is to “sink” like a stone

into the abyss which is in us and which is God’s abode. The great mistake we make in our spiritual lives is to tarry at these intermediary zones instead of going straight to God. We let ourselves be infiltrated by regrets, plans, desires, care. Even if we move forward, it is only to pine over our spiritual wretchedness. Basically, our inner life is often merely another way—more subtle, more refined, less crude, more dangerous—of worrying about ourselves.⁵

Like the diver on the platform, the believer’s task is not to tarry on the edge of the reality that is God, but to plunge into the divine abyss despite our fears and allow ourselves to see that God dwells in the world everywhere.

*My Bright Abyss*, the contemporary poet Christian Wiman’s account of his return to Christian faith as an adult struggling with cancer, vividly depicts how a mature approach to God is not necessarily a comforting or easy thing. The book’s title came from an essay about a poem that he began and could not finish.

*My God my bright abyss*

*Into which all my longing will not go*

*Once more I come to the edge of all I know*

*And believing nothing believe in this.*

Wiman’s essay explained the newness and strangeness of faith in a God who is both immanent to his creation but also utterly transcendent in a way that even his presence seems hidden and distant. He notes that when the Bible “speaks of the eternal Word being made specific flesh, . . . there is no permutation of humanity in which
Christ is not present.” Yet this presence is indirect and elusive. It could be mistaken simply for a dark abyss of absence, but to eyes lit up by the Spirit’s gift of faith it is instead a “bright abyss” calling out even amid images of the decay of flowers, fire, and winter.

LORD, I can approach you only by means of my consciousness, but consciousness can only approach you as an object, which you are not. I have no hope of experiencing you as I experience the world—directly, immediately—yet I have no hunger greater. Indeed, so great is my hunger for you—or is this evidence of your hunger for me?—that I seem to see you in the black flower mourners make beside a grave I do not know, in the ember’s innards like a shining hive, in the bare abundance of a winter tree whose every limb is lit and fraught with snow. Lord, Lord, how bright the abyss inside that “seem.”

All things, as the lines from St. Athanasius that sit atop this essay have it, give us knowledge of God. Some are warm and inviting, a still small voice or perhaps that warm ember’s innards. Some, like the absurdities in both personal and public life, make us laugh in the presence of God as the aging Sarah did upon finding out that she was to have pleasure and a child in her old age. Some, like death and destruction, demand both patience and the ability to see God hidden in a providence not always easy to detect. Like tragedy, our perception of everlasting life and the tremendousness of space that echoes God’s immensity bring a fear that can only finally be faced by leaping into that abyss of God.

True knowledge of God can only be had in the midst of a life in which all work is undertaken based on prayer and all prayer leads to action. For the Catholic, it is not necessary to be a person of high learning or broad culture or discerning taste to be a disciple. God is present even in persons for whom learning capacities are limited. A baptized child is just as filled with the Holy Trinity as a baptized college professor who came to faith through reading. Catholics do not
suffer from what Umberto Eco called “librido,” meaning the need
to understand everything exclusively through books and articles,
poems and essays, words, words, words.

But we must emphasize that word “exclusively” if we are to
be honest. Intellectual exploration—of the reality of God, of the
world, and of humans and their culture, which bear his image in a
special way—answers a human need for knowledge in general and
a specific need for the believer. We want to explore and know intel-
lectually because intellectual knowledge can be a means to loving
God more, serving him better, and making him known and loved.
It is no accident that the term used to designate the eternal Son of
the Father in the Gospel of John is *logos*—“word” or even “rational
discourse.” For the Son is the mediator between God and humanity,
giving us access to the Father’s frightening eternity but also translat-
ing it into something understandable and decipherable to us in the
creation he made to be a temple of his immense presence.

This issue of *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*
marks the end of our first twenty years of seeking out God’s presence—
sometimes vividly displayed and sometimes only glimpsed as
through a glass darkly, in every permutation of humanity and cul-
ture from the cozy to the odd to the frightening—and providing
words and rational discourse that illuminate and unfold the mean-
ing and beauty of that presence.

It is, God willing, the first twenty years for us, for we hope to
continue what we do for a long time. Our goal from the beginning
has been to produce high-quality intellectual articles that are intel-
ligible and accessible to a wide range of scholars and lay people who
want to plunge themselves into the Catholic intellectual tradition
and explore its breadth and depth without being artificially limited
by disciplinary barriers that are supposed to encourage depth but
which can in practice limit it. We feel that we have done this at a
very high level and in a very distinct way, as evidenced by conversa-
tions with people who will talk about a “Logos piece.” They mean, I
think, a piece that engages questions of culture and truth at a high
level in light of Catholic tradition in a way that is disciplined and interdisciplinary, thorough but also stylish.

Our confidence that our articles really do match this definition is boosted by a number of factors: the willingness of brilliant and talented scholars and writers to write blurbs for the journal, the Council of Editors of Learned Journals’ designation of us as “clearly superior,” and the after-history of many of our articles. Some win awards. Frank L. Jones won an award from the U.S. Army War College for his “‘The High Priest of Deterrence’: Sir Michael Quinlan, Nuclear Weapons, and the Just War Tradition” (Summer 2013). Others are discovered by editors and publishers who request permission to reprint them in books or other journals. Recently Kathleen Urda’s article “Eros and Contemplation: The Catholic Vision of Terrence Malick’s To the Wonder” (Winter 2016) was picked to appear in a volume of important essays on film and religion. Many authors write articles that appear here first and later become part of the backbone of their own books. Japanese scholar Kei Uno recently wrote to us about the use of his Fall 2015 article, “The Activities of the Marianists and Catholic Intellectuals in Japan Prior to the Second World War,” in his new book, Catholic Japanese Intellectuals and Cardinal Newman (Academica Press, 2017).

Perhaps the best sign that we are doing what we intend comes from the testimonies of readers, academic and nonacademic alike, whom this journal has indeed helped to dive in intellectually and sometimes even spiritually. One of my favorite accounts of such happenings itself comes from a Logos article. At the end of his Summer 2008 article, “The Correspondence of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz: Monasticism and Society in Dialogue,” Benedictine poet and theologian Jeremy Driscoll recounts how an earlier Logos article, ‘‘Inheritor’: A Poem by Czeslaw Milosz,” in which Driscoll had “examin[ed] his hesitation to so label himself and at the same time the massive impact of Catholic themes on so much of what he wrote,” wound up being read by the poet himself, then late in life.
I sent a draft of this article to a friend of mine in Krakow, who, without my knowledge, showed it to Milosz. He said to my friend, “I would like to meet this monk.” He was not only struck by what I had written; he was also struck that a monk had written it. Since I was living in Rome at that time, a trip to Krakow was possible; and I jumped at the chance of meeting the great poet whose writings I so much admired. Our conversations—we met twice for about an hour—were immediately intense, with him setting the tone and the pace. He asked me virtually at the outset, “Do you as a monk find anything useful in my poetry?” I answered him that of course I did and that I would tell him why. But first I wanted to know why he was asking with this emphasis, why the phrase “as a monk.” He answered—and this is no secret for those who read him closely—that at the end of his life he doubted the spiritual value of his work. He anguished over this question. Very humbly he thought maybe a monk could tell him if there were any spiritual value in it.

Naturally I was astonished to find myself so suddenly thrust into such a position, but through his writings I knew him well enough to know that he was in deadly earnest. He wanted an evaluation of his poetry from a monk. I thought to myself, well, I am a monk, and I have profited from him as a monk. So, I will tell him. On the table before us was a copy of his collected poems spanning more than seventy years. It was a volume I knew well. I picked it up and began reading his poems back to him, telling him of their importance to me, of their “usefulness,” to use his term. It was a moving exchange for both of us. At one point he said to me, “Everybody has always told me that my poetry is great and important to them, but nobody ever tells me why. You are telling me why.”

After these meetings, Milosz asked Driscoll to write to him and, though Milosz was too weak to write back (this was in the last year of his life), he would tell his secretary his responses, which would then be communicated to Driscoll over the phone. Driscoll writes
of this strangely complicated yet intimate communication that “we spoke of many things: suffering, sin, the role of dogma, Job, the death of Jesus, the nature of prayer, the role of the Church, forgiveness of sins. Through it all I was conscious that he was wanting to hear about these things from a monk.” What the correspondence with Thomas Merton (which Driscoll analyzes in the main body of the article) failed to provide Milosz was in some sense given to him in this late-life encounter with Driscoll. An encounter facilitated in large part, I am pleased to say, by an article that appeared in these pages.

This assistance in intellectual and spiritual diving is not limited to the famous. In a recent message from a (nonacademic) subscriber in Indiana, I was pleased to read his judgment, “The quality of the journal is impressive, David.” Continuing on, he wrote:

I greatly appreciated the Winter and Spring volumes of Logos. Nathan Lefler’s piece on Flannery O’Connor [Winter 2017] was especially enjoyable. It had me pulling out her Habit of Being and Mystery and Manners. Conversations with Flannery are ever abrasive, challenging, and full of hard grace. Lefler’s discussion of Miss O’Connor’s insistence that, “The creative action of the Christian’s life is to prepare his death in Christ” had me thinking with sympathy of how early she had to prepare herself for the end. You and I, in our forties, have lived longer than our Southern Sister of Letters, which, for me, is a humbling realization of just how little I have prepared for that day of hope and trepidation.

We are grateful for the opportunity to provide this kind of seriously provoking article that also brings enjoyment and contemplation. And we are grateful to have found ways of bringing it to readers all over the globe. We have reached readers in more than eighty countries and have had articles downloaded from Project Muse more than 330,000 times since 2004. We are not comfortably reclining on our numerical laurels, however. We want more people to have access. In the past year we have made this journal more acces-
sible in several ways, offering the possibility of online subscriptions both for individuals and for institutions. We have also, through a generous grant from the Cushman Foundation and a number of gifts from individual subscribers, begun a two-year marketing campaign to help us reach more readers who want to plunge in and explore. In this task of marketing, our readers are crucial, for they are the ones who often introduce friends, seminarians, priests, and even bishops to Logos either by passing on a copy or a link to the journal’s website, or by giving a gift subscription.

We hope you will celebrate this first twenty years with us. We’re grateful for your support, your encouragement, your reading, your submissions, and your messages to us. We hope you will wish and pray for us ad multos annos as we continue to explore the world in light of the knowledge of the Logos that fills all things.

The saints are those who plunge most deeply into the sometimes terrifying immensity of God, experiencing powerful suffering and the experience of the dark night of the soul. Sr. Albert Marie Surmanski, O.P., examines two very different experiences of this suffering in “Hunger and Thirst: Suffering with Christ in Sts. Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Kolkata.” Using the thought of John Paul II and Thomas Aquinas to examine the meaning of their experiences, she discerns a providential “flexibility” in God’s dealings with humans, making their experiences fit for helping others.

God reveals to each person a unique path—a path ordered to reflect not only the characteristics of the individual, but also the age in which he or she lives, the age to which (in the case of the saints given to the Church as exemplars) the saint’s life is meant to speak. Catherine’s luminous desire perfectly fit the age of faith in which she lived—a time in which God’s truths were known to those around her but often ignored in practice. Her thirst reflects the state of the Church during her life: a mother yearning for her believing but unfaithful
children. Perhaps Teresa’s darkness better fits our age, so enveloped by unbelief and in which, for many, the darkness of suffering obscures the face of God.

**John F. Owens, SM**, too reflects on the experience of our age, meaning more broadly the shaggy but recognizable “modernity” of the last several hundred years, in which “the world as reduced to an object of our subjective will can seem interesting and precious so long as we are caught up in that particular sort of view, perhaps because its lines of significance come back to us.” In “**Creation, Paradise Lost, and Modernity,**” he traces this line of thought through dueling interpretations of Milton’s masterpiece. The task of religious believers today is to follow the “the older, orthodox interpretation of Milton’s poem” that “suggests that our greatest blessing is to leave this behind, to consent to enter a world that we have not made, a world not upheld by our will but gloriously independent of us.”

Once we have entered that “gloriously independent” world, we are tasked as Christians with communicating it to others. **Matthew Muller’s** “**The False Idol of Beauty: Bl. John Henry Newman’s Critiques of Aesthetics and the Challenge of Evangelization**” reminds us that an excessive reliance on aesthetic technique in communicating the Gospel of Jesus Christ can lead us straight back into the traps of modernity that Owens and before him Newman warn about, sacrificing the truth of the world to our subjective experience of it. Muller juxtaposes the image of Pope Francis embracing a disfigured man with that of Brittany Maynard, a terminally ill woman demanding a “right” to assisted suicide, most commonly pictured snuggling a puppy. “Which image represents the beauty of compassion? Both do, if the beauty of compassion is mere feeling or sentiment. This problem is what Newman recognized, and it poses a challenge for the prospects of evangelizing through beauty alone.”

Chesterton’s novels are not merely (or even always) beautiful, but they are often provocative in that they push the reader to see the mystery of God. **Marisa Pierson’s** “**Apocalyptic Conversion**
in a Sacramental World: The Meeting of Heaven and Earth in Chesterton’s The Ball and the Cross” argues that the particular power of GKC’s third novel, about a never-ending duel between an Atheist and a Catholic, lies in its sacramental view of earth’s relation to heaven and this time to the end times:

The content and structure of The Ball and the Cross provides an opportunity for readers to connect its ending with the final coming of Christ, and the novel thereby acts as a reminder of the Christian belief that life itself, not just life in Chesterton’s novel, is defined by an intersection between heaven and earth. In communicating this reminder, The Ball and the Cross itself becomes like a sacrament, conveying a divine message through the material vehicle of words and providing an opportunity for the reception of grace.

Christ will come at the end of the world, but he comes also to us in this world, especially at our deaths. Rev. Lawrence B. Porter examines the historicity and the meaning of his namesake’s death in “St. Lawrence’s Death on a Grill: Fact or Fiction? An Update on the Controversy.” While many scholars have rejected the accounts of the saint’s death that had him roasted on a grill and jesting, “Turn me over; I’m done on this side,” as mere legend, Fr. Porter’s examination of the historical and hagiographical records lead him to a different conclusion:

Ambrose, Prudentius, and Augustine do not dazzle their audience with miracles and fantastic tales of supernatural events. They do not succumb to a misguided ‘popular imagination.’ Instead, they present us with a serious moral lesson regarding the courage and daring so often exhibited in the saints. St. Lawrence, along with the art and architecture his story has inspired, will continue to stand out for the extraordinary valor he demonstrated during one of the darkest periods of Christian persecution in Church history.
We close this issue with our Reconsiderations feature. We reprint the great nineteenth-century political and philosophical thinker Orestes Brownson’s 1864 essay “Civil and Religious Freedom,” in which he argued fiercely for religious liberty and the superiority of the American relation between church and state:

All sects should be equal before the civil law, and each citizen protected in the right to choose and profess his own religion, which we call his conscience, as his natural right, so long as he respects the equal right of others. This is the American order, and we dare maintain that it is the Christian order; for when the Disciples proposed to call down fire from heaven to consume the adversaries of our Lord, he rebuked them, and told them that they “knew not what manner of spirit they were of.”

Richard M. Reinsch II, from whose anthology of Brownson essays “Civil and Religious Freedom” is taken, explains in his introduction, “Orestes Brownson’s Freedom of the Church,” the theological, philosophical, and political landscape in which the great man operated. He argues, however, that Brownson’s thinking is not merely of historical interest. Brownson, he writes,

ultimately provided in this essay a teaching that goes beyond calculated adjustment to contemporary circumstances that existed between church and state. He grounded religious freedom in the nature of the human person, because religion is the quintessential internal decision made by citizens and the state was “incompetent” to regulate this choice. Brownson clearly stated that he was not embracing theological tolerance or mere indifference to the varieties of religious choice. Error, Brownson observed, does not have rights, but human beings possess equal rights to err before the state on religious identification.

David Paul Deavel
Editor
Notes


4. Ibid., 39.

5. Ibid., 30.