

**“YES, GOD IS REAL”**  
**A Born-Again Public Intellectual on Catholic Faith**  
**in Reason and Community**

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Thank you for having me with you. Thanks to the Provost and the Provost’s Committee on Catholic Intellectual Traditions. And thanks to the Boisi Center and its leader, Professor Alan Wolfe.

Professor Wolfe is a hero of mine, and I have few heroes called “professor.” He’s genuinely learned, intellectually judicious, passionately yet prudently progressive in his politics, and smart about religion and American public life in ways that inform and inspire. God bless him.

Now, as Professor Wolfe knows, I’m usually invited places twice—the first time to speak, and the second time to apologize for what I said the first time. So let me apologize in advance and entreat ask you to hold the good professor and the other sponsors blameless for whatever you don’t like about me or my words here this evening.

As Professor Wolfe also knows, like him, I’m a Philadelphia-bred guy; my wife of 28 years, and high school sweetheart of 34 years, is a Philly soul too. When I lived up here in the early 80’s, my wife and I were often homesick. We’d get back every chance and see family and friends. But my old South and Southwest Philly buddies were not impressed by my being a Ph.D. student at Harvard. In fact, they teased me about being a perennial student. So, on one visit, I told my old Philly crew that I was working with this famous professor named James Q. Wilson.

This guy Wilson, I boasted, had written a big book, called *Thinking About Crime*, and I was working with him on the revised edition of that book, *Thinking About Crime*. “You see Johnny,” one shook his head and said, “that’s the problem! You go to Boston you go to Harvard and you’re thinking about crime, thinking about crime—why don’t you just do it?” To this day my old friends still don’t quite get the “professor” thing. Then again, when I first started college at Penn, I didn’t, either.

For instance, day one I sat in on a philosophy class. The professor said that we couldn’t know anything for sure. All knowledge, he said, was vague, cocksure, and self-contradictory. There were, he said, no universal, eternal, changeless, or perfect truths, factual or moral, just assorted half-truths, falsehoods, and self-delusions.

In fact, he said, we couldn't even be sure that we were there... So I left.

I left and I never went back. I majored in economics and political science at Penn, and I also picked up a master's in policy studies during my four years as a live-at-home commuting student attending Penn when not working construction. I got pretty drenched in social science, a.k.a. the elaborate demonstration of the obvious by methods that are obscure. I did not take any philosophy or any religion or religious studies classes, either. Instead, I took several courses in yet another social science, psychology.

## **God-Avoidance Learning**

In fact, I nearly minored in psychology, but my psychology professor in a class labeled "Learning" made me think twice about doing so.

"If you believe in God," he warned in his first lecture before a packed room, "you may find this course disturbing." The course was anchored in "experimental science," he said; and "science," he went on, does not "indulge" religious beliefs, starting with the belief in God or a Creator.

There were a couple hundred kids in the room, but I felt kind of like he was talking especially to me. I simply believed, and believed simply, in God; but this then 19-year-old cradle Catholic wasn't worried.

I had attended a Catholic elementary school run by Immaculate Heart of Mary nuns (the kind who could, given amphibious gear, invade Cuba and win); I had been a post-Vatican II altar boy (no Latin); and I was a more or less practicing Catholic teenager with two living, larger-than-life, more-Catholic-than-the-Pope, but only semi-literate old immigrant Italian Catholic grandmothers.

When I was living in South Philly, my maternal grandmother used to drag me to church with her every day to light three candles, one each for the two sons she had lost during World War Two, and one for "Mr. Roosevelt," who had rescued the family, she taught me and her other grandchildren, during the Great Depression. "Nanny," I asked her one day, "why do you always wear black?" She replied in her broken English, "Eh, if anybody dies, I'm-a ready."

Besides, I had had a great "science nun" as we called her back in the day. I also knew my parish priests, and they seemed like pretty smart, well-read guys; and I knew some Catholic nurses and medical doctors too—they couldn't all be anti-science or no-science morons, right?

To be honest, however, and with no disrespect to the late and distinguished professor—God rest his soul—I wasn't bothered in the least because, even though I could not then articulate my reasons for feeling as I did, I just sensed that, regarding God, the professor was talking out his much-esteemed ass.

I had read up before taking the course. I knew that his big claim to scientific fame was something called avoidance learning. Basically, his seminal experiment was to place dogs into

shuttle boxes in the dark. Each box had two chambers. The lights would come on in the chamber where the dog was standing or laying, then a few seconds would pass, and then he would shoot electric into that chamber of the box and zap the dog. Guess what? To avoid the electric shock, the dog would beat feet to the other chamber. And guess what else? Soon enough the dog would learn to beat feet to the other side as soon as the lights came on.

I found the “science” trite, but I stayed in the course.

As I recall feeling at the time, “If I have to choose between shocked-into-savvy dogs or (the professor’s other favorite) semi-starved, bar-pressing rats—tick, tock, tick, tock—hey, I think I’m going to stick with the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus.” God is not just dog spelled backwards; no God-avoidance learning for me.

Although I had at that point never read a Catholic or catechetical lick concerning “faith and reason” or such, I simply assumed that believing in the Big Bang (or other scientifically discernible creation moments or modalities) did not thereby require me to deny a (or the) “Big Banger.”

Rather, I unthinkingly thought that believing the latest and best science suggesting that T-Rex and company were not the first mass extinction; following Mr. Alford, my high school biology teacher, in reasoning from the empirical evidence that it likely took several cumulative probability miracle-events for we carbon-based life forms to come into being (or creation) and over time to establish such dominion as we humans had yet achieved over other species and the earth; thinking that the mathematical theory precursors to what in the 90’s became intelligent design claims were probably not very intelligent beneath it all; and believing other good science I had learned without being God-free, did not logically or otherwise require me to stop being a card-carrying Catholic, or to debate with myself or with others the God of Abraham et al’s existence, or, for that matter, to dabble in Christian apologetics before shrugging off some guy who shocked dogs to advance a (to me) rather boring branch of science.

## **God and Me at Harvard**

But, during my years at Harvard, I sort of backed and filled on the philosophy that I had not studied with supervision (but had read up on a bit) at Penn. I had several great teachers and sat in on courses, but much reading remained largely on my own, including in such areas as epistemology and philosophy of science and the history of ideas.

I became deeply enamored by certain historians of ideas, none more rewarding to me than Sir Isaiah Berlin. In the 1980’s, I read every essay that Berlin had published, and read many several times over. I also started what became the Harvard Tocqueville Society, with a special regard for what old Alexis, the great 19<sup>th</sup> century observer of American prisons better known for his work on American democracy, and a French Catholic, had to say about dogma and religion.

First, Berlin; I was especially captivated by Berlin’s ideas concerning empirical, formal, and philosophical questions.

As widely conceived in the West, intellectual progress was essentially about converting philosophical questions into either empirical questions or formal questions: thus did alchemy give way to chemistry and astrology (save in popular beliefs) become supplanted by astronomy and astrophysics.

Berlin did not for a moment doubt that intellectual progress had indeed been made, much of it as linear as you like. The best that had ever been said, thought, or done regarding a field like biology or chemistry or physics, he conceded, was being done in our own day. Thus, Aristotle's writing on physics, his biological taxonomies, his musings about physical matter, merited only purely historical or antiquarian interest.

Ah, but what about Aristotle's writing on ethics? What of the intellectual status of questions like "How ought I to live?"

The twentieth century's radical empiricists and logical positivists, Berlin averred, were only among the latest thinkers dating back to Plato to mistakenly assume (1) that any true question (true question as opposed to mere semantic construction or empty word play) can have one and only one true answer; (2) that the true answers to all true questions are presently, potentially, or at least in principle knowable; and (3) that the true answers to all true questions, once discovered, must or will be consistent (logically and otherwise) with one another.

Alas, Berlin argued, some true questions are not capable of being converted as such to empirical or formal questions. These are the philosophical questions, a *non-residual* category of true questions that encompass everything from political theory standards such as "What is justice?" to theological queries concerning "Does God exist?"

In numerous essays, Berlin found in diverse thinkers ranging from assorted German irrationalists to the usual British empiricists (including even David Hume) a justification for an epistemological stance favorable to both intellectual pluralism *and* political pluralism cum liberalism.

Berlin did not deny the need to pick one's poison: free will or determinism; human life as accidental, as chance's byproduct, or—not; a meek and mild Saint Francis or a blood-lusting Roman Caesar.

Properly understood in all his intellectual originality, Machiavelli, Berlin famously insisted, was merely advising princes that they too must choose, and warning them against half-choices unto political half-measures.

On Berlin's reading, Machiavelli was, at bottom, expressing the Florentine's own quasi-pagan preference for a glorious and grand state or empire—*with no pretense, however*, that his preferred polity, or his preferred prince for all seasons, embodied all the desirable things, all the diverse virtues, all the multiple and competing purposes or values that human minds can conceive, that human hearts can desire, and that human cultures can foster (if present) or fossilize (if past).

Centuries before Edward Gibbon, Machiavelli tagged Christianity's morally enervating influence on Rome's princes for the Empire's decline and loss, but he had no quarrel, per se, with Christian morality, saints, and martyrs. His point was that Emperors, try though they ought to be lovable, or to appear so unto being loved, must be feared when they need to be feared, up to and including literally crucifying their present or potential enemies. Young Julius Caesar, ransomed from pirates, did the princely thing in immediately proceeding to hunt down his captors, crucifying them all. Christians, however, can eschew Julius and worship Jesus—just remember that, in this world, the effectual truth is that nice guys and innocents not only often finish last, but get scourged and slaughtered by beings like Julius (and beings like Julius get murdered by beings like Julius too...)

So one must choose: Julius or Jesus? Know the good you choose, know what you are about, and know better than to lead others astray with false assurances about Jesus-like beings often besting Julius-like ones in the City of Man. The Jesus followers' kingdom is truly not in this world, nor should anyone pretend that it is.

By a similar token, Berlin's Machiavelli, had he lived to read Nietzsche, would have rejected the migraine-headed, God-is dead German's desire for a "superman" in the character of a "Caesar with the soul of a Christ." You can't have your beyond-good-and-evil cake and eat it too. History's hit men and henchman get or feign religion, beg for mercy, or cry out for justice, but only after "the bovine" and ostensibly "weak" many prevail over them and prepare to punish them for their dirtiest deeds. Christians deepen the victory as well as the insult when they show the merciless mercy and forgiveness.

Also with Berlin, I could brush off all the pseudo-scientific atheists, and all the post-this, that, or the other nihilists, past and present, who insist not only that one believe in nothing, but that one believe firmly in their respective (and competing!) brands of nothing.

Likewise, I could casually tease my Harvard and later my Princeton students with my favorite Natural Law fable: A top-flight undergraduate in a moral reasoning class wrote his final paper under the heading "There is no such thing as justice." The professor penned: "You have done outstanding work throughout the semester. Your class participation was excellent. Your exams were the best I have ever received in this course. Your papers were superb, one and all. And this, your final paper, is brilliantly written and a tour de force. Paper Grade: F...Final Course Grade: F...P.S. Don't complain about the grades—you convinced me, 'there's no such thing as justice.' "

Turning quickly now to Tocqueville, he reinforced in me the intellectual justification for both intellectual and political pluralism, the liberating notion that bottomless doubts are but first cousins to diverse dogmas, and the implicit writ to make even the examined life an active life.

As Tocqueville waxed in the second volume of *Democracy in America*: "*There is no philosopher in the world so great but that he believes a million things on the faith of other people and accepts a great many more truths than he demonstrates... God...never feels the need of general ideas; that is to say, he never feels the necessity of collecting a considerable number of analogous*

*objects under the same form for greater convenience in thinking. Such, however, is not the case with man. General ideas are no proof of the strength, but rather of the insufficiency of the human intellect... (M)en cannot do without dogmatic belief... (O)f all the kinds of dogmatic belief, the most desirable appears to me to be dogmatic belief in matters of religion...”*

## **God Still on Hold**

In sum, I left Harvard, ten years after I left the philosophy class at Penn, feeling like I had a passable if idiosyncratic and disjoint intellectual justification for defending my cradle Catholic beliefs against any and all comers—including me, if necessary.

How interesting, then, that shortly after I gained that supposed intellectual edge in defending my childhood faith, I did not return to church, and proceeded to think and act professionally, if not personally, with almost no regard for how my intellectual being related to my spiritual being (such as it was).

For most years from 1986 to about 1996, I was more lost than found, a hammer unto every nail, and a buzz saw with self-recharging batteries. I got tenure at Princeton University just two years after getting my Harvard Ph.D., and I was promoted to full professor only two years later. I took over several programs at Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School, and did all that was necessary to launch a new research center there too. But that was just the warm up. I also founded research centers at the Brookings Institution (on the center-left) and the Manhattan Institute (on the center-right).

Oh, and I had a senior position at Public/Private Ventures in Philly, and offices and staff everywhere (D.C., New York, Princeton, Philly). I published so much so fast on so many subjects—health care reform, civil service reform, American politics, crime and punishment, and more—that several colleagues wondered whether I had a ghost writer hidden somewhere. I did not; I just slept only a few hours a night. Meanwhile, I got involved with news media outlets, leading politicians in both parties, and on and on it went. I raised millions in money for my projects and for others’ projects. In 1992, at age 34, I almost won a major award given every 3 years, and previously won only by young economists, for the most distinguished policy-oriented scholar under age 40; in 1995, at age 37, I won it—and almost forgot to go to the conference award ceremony to “pick it up.”

Physically and spiritually, I was “burning the candle at both ends and in the middle.” I was; but I ignored the warnings and signs.

The worst of it took three forms. The first form was the work for which I became most famous or infamous, namely, my get-tough work on crime policy. It was epitomized by how I mastered reading prisoners’ rap sheets. I would browse the first several pages—the parts about their early, pre-crime, pre-sentencing, sinned against before sinning, bleak lives—the better to zero in on their criminal records, their plea bargain deals, and the social harm they had wrought. I bitched when the *Wall Street Journal* labeled one crime policy op-ed (I wrote over a dozen) “Let ‘em Rot,” and again when my writings on violent juveniles were taken out of context. I attacked, counter-attacked, and bested successive academic and popular critics. I continued to win

academic plaudits and awards, to drive public policy debates, and to amass an ever fatter power-player rolodex to boot. Yet I knew deep down that something was not right.

The second sign, if you will, was how it began to affect and afflict my teaching, my student service, and related habits: I was still getting top student reviews for teaching, but I was not working on my lectures or revising them as I once had done; nor was I any longer routinely available for extra office hours or such; nor, when I sorted my phone messages—the old pink slips—did I pick up the pile with my students’ messages first. Instead, I returned calls from important journalists, funding sources, public figures, or others, before theirs.

The third scrawl on the wall was how, even as I was somehow always home and with my wife and my young kids and my relatives and my old friends, I was often only half-there with them mentally; how I punctuated family vacations with multiple daily Federal Express packages and phone calls; and so on.

But the best of it also had three prongs. First, I had done a study of how liquor store densities increased violent crime in low-income urban neighborhoods; the other “dots” on the map were churches: if booze barns had negative externalities, did prayer barns have positive ones? That question caught my imagination, and it led me to begin talking about “faith factor” studies. Thus, I had an academically kosher cover for taking religion seriously if I decided to squeeze it onto my agenda.

Second, I started visiting urban churches and hanging out with inner-city Black and Latino clergy. My eyes widened as I watched all the social service delivery chores they did, including real work with dangerous juvenile and adult felons. And these “faith-based organizations,” as I dubbed them, served needy children, youth, and families, from preschoolers to ex-prisoners, without regard to anybody’s religion or background. What is more, they did so much without any government aid and with little or no foundation support or philanthropic boosting. Philly, Camden, Boston, New York, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and other urban places—everywhere it was the same “sacred places/civic purposes” story. Some places, like here in Boston, it was a dramatic story involving big and positive civic changes wrought by small, faith-based networks.

Third—and this was the holy element in this trinity—I started listening to the ministers, not just studying them or bean-counting them or whatnot. Among the most important to me, as I tell in the introduction to my book, *Godly Republic*, was an old Black Pentecostal pastor in North Philly, Benjamin “Pops” Smith.

I thought I was doing Pops favors, like when I brought then Senator John Ashcroft in to see him and the massive social service delivery operation Pops had going in his massive church complex. Ashcroft toured the site’s preschool program and said “Why can’t government do more like this?” only to learn at once that the program he praised was, in fact, a church-based Head Start center. (Somebody say “amen”!)

But Pops was not interested in such real or perceived favors. His “soul patrols,” as he called the programs, delivered social services, but that was not what moved him to move them.

No. Pops believed that God was real, and he was desperate to get others to believe the same and to act on the knowledge, for real.

“You got God on hold, boy,” Pops preached. “Don’t care what you know, who you know, or what you think you know. You got to get right with God. Forget the men and the magazines. Forget all that mess. Get right with God, son. Get right with God.”

Pops was not my only minister. I had a unique stable that included other Black and Latino clergy; Chuck Colson, the Watergate-era felon turned evangelical patron to prisoners; Ron Sider, the center-left theologian who founded Evangelicals for Social Action; several Catholics including Father George Bur, a Jesuit priest who in 1993 saved an inner-city North Philly Catholic school, called the Gesu, from closing, and turned it into a model school; and others.

## **Feel Him in My Soul**

One Sunday in Pops’ church they sang a song called “Yes, God is Real.”

As I later learned, the song was written in 1944 by Kenneth Morris, the Chicago-based co-owner of what was the nation’s oldest Black music publishing company. Over the years, many other lyricists, and several different performers, modified the song’s wording. I’ve heard versions by numerous artists who have covered it—Jerry Lee Lewis; Little Richard; Johnny Cash; my slow-version favorite, Mahalia Jackson; my slow-version nominee for should-be-criminally-penalized, Pat Boone; and others.

Pops had a tape of the version I heard by his Deliverance Evangelistic church choir, and I got it from him over a decade ago, but I have not been able to locate it. (Additional prayers to Saint Anthony welcome.)

But we have with us tonight one of Boston’s own best-known Pentecostal clergy, who himself started out in Philly in the 60’s as a gun-toting thug and was saved by Pops Smith and the Deliverance family: Reverend Eugene F. Rivers, III. I hope that we can prevail upon the reverend to sing a few verses.

{Reverend Rivers.}

*Yes, God Is Real*

*Real in my Soul*

*Yes, God Is Real for He Has Washed and Made Me Whole!*

*His Love for Me is Like Pure Gold*

*Yes, God is Real for I Can Feel Him in My Soul*

Thank you, Rev. Rivers.

Well, Easter season 1996, I could not get those words out of my head. I kept playing the Pops’ church tape over and over, which probably didn’t help.

Sitting in a Catholic church in Wildwood, New Jersey on Palm Sunday 1996 (I know, it's getting weirder by the moment), I had something akin to what evangelicals call a born-again experience or moment. I didn't come to Jesus, for I was already, I thought, with Him. Nor did I suddenly start believing in God the Father, or start believing in God with some mystical insight.

No. I simply felt in my soul that God is real. Not in my Penn, Princeton, or Harvard thoughts. I felt the truth in my soul. And I then and there resolved that this "faith-based" stuff was not going to be another notch on my belt. It was going to be central to my personal and professional life, my intellectual and civic life, my faith and reason life—my life, period.

And then, with my new-felt faith—say it how you wish, "revived," "restored," "reborn," whatever—I remembered Saint James: "Faith without works is dead."

I remembered Saint Ignatius: "Love ought to show itself in deeds more than in words."

I remembered a thousand other moments and life lessons that taught the same, but that I had until then largely given short shrift.

Boy, do something for real, because, boy, God is real!

Analyze. Advocate. Get up close and personal on the streets, not just chatter from the suites. Develop real programs. Do mentoring. Do violence reduction. Do literacy. Do medical support. Do prisoner re-entry. Do!

And make it *Magis!* ("More" as the Jesuits say.)

Pops and others called it a "Holy Ghost thing." I bought it because I felt it, but my next stop was the *Catholic Catechism*, start to finish. Wherein, to my surprise—and maybe I was and am simply projecting onto it what I felt and wanted to hear—I discovered a Pentecostal, Resurrection Power, Holy Ghost dimension to Catholic teaching that I had never previously noticed.

Anyway, I swallowed the *Catechism* whole. I started taking it with me. In May 1999, at a conference in Tennessee, on a panel with Al Gore, I pulled it out before the crowd and quipped "Don't leave home or Rome without it."

## **God-is-Real Catholics**

In a very nice 2006 master's thesis in music, University of Pittsburgh student Brandi Amanda Neal recounted the following call-and-response sermon given by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

**Rev. King:** I got my marching shoes!

**Congregation:** Yes Lord, me too.

**Rev. King:** I woke up this morning with my mind on freedom!

**Congregation:** Preach, doctor, preach...

**Rev. King:** The struggle is not between black and white!

**Congregation:** No, no.

**Rev. King:** But between good and evil!

**Congregation:** That's it!; that's it.

**Rev. King:** For God is not dead; I know because I can feel him...

**Congregation:** Deep in my soul!

As Neal writes, the call-and-response sermon's climactic exchange between pastor and flock—King's "I can feel," and the congregation's "in my soul"—are not from a traditional "freedom song" like the famous "We Shall Overcome," but instead a "spiritual" one; but this reference to "Yes, God is Real," as she suggests, marks the "fluidity between the church and the movement."

*Deep in my soul!*

What I felt in feeling that God is real is that I could not trust my spiritual cum civic soul *either* to my old unreflective cradle Catholic beliefs, *or* to the most intellectually erudite Catholic apologetic masters, lay or clergy.

Let me be clear. Next to childhood memories, and after the pageantry of being Catholic, I love the intellectual majesty of the Church's great doctors and thinkers.

I confess my slight Catholic chauvinism in hearing my evangelical friends yap about Abraham Kuyper's 1863 "sphere sovereignty" notion and knowing that Mother Church had the intellectual mother load on a more refined version of the same civil society concepts centuries earlier, and before Pope Leo XIII codified it as "subsidiarity" doctrine.

I confess feeling that I'm paying for the sins of my misspent Philly youth when I hear non-Catholic Christians who I respect go on about sexuality when I have a recent Pope, John Paul the Second, whose "theology of the body" is, well, pretty hot stuff (intellectually speaking, of course). And so on.

So, I'm not for trading or discounting the Catholic intellectual edge.

But I am convinced that Catholics, at least in this country, are spiritually dull. We have much to teach, but also much to learn, about how faith—hope in the unseen—works.

If you will, we need more than a little Black Pentecostal Church of God in Christ, or COGIC, in our Catholic tradition, even as we lend a little Catholic tradition to a COGIC.

We've got John Paul the Second's "two wings" encyclical, but American Catholics tend to compartmentalize faith and reason, don't we? Faith is Sunday, it's holidays, it's private and only incidentally public, it's...

It's *not* what you would expect from people who really *feel* that God is real.

Understand me, please: I'm only saying that knowing "God is real," especially in a church with the Catholic Church's teachings about preferential love for the poor, about reducing "sinful inequalities," about reconciliation and forgiveness, and about "just war" might reasonably be expected to "show up," as it were, in the "data" on Catholic social and civic behavior.

But, to cite just a small sample, the data include Catholic colleges and universities, led by the most well schooled Catholic thinkers, with or without religious collars, raising money for themselves and their institutions in the shadow of inner-city Catholic schools that have been closed, not for lack of demand, but because the non-Catholic poor who want to attend can't pay. (I told you I got invited places twice...)

The data include the aforementioned Gesu School, which would not have lived without the aforementioned Father Bur, but which has thrived only because Jewish philanthropists and non-Christian Catholics have taken on such a huge financial support and administrative role—a world-class inter-faith mosaic, but a bit embarrassing when suburban Catholics who once lived in the City are more focused on the Archdiocese doing more for them and their schools.

The data include only limited Catholic engagement in inter-faith, ecumenical, and public-private partnerships intended to help change the reality that a Black child born in America today has a 1 in 3 lifetime probability of being incarcerated.

The data include Catholic missionaries struggling, literally begging their own fellow Catholics, among others, for help in sub-Saharan Africa, a place that has over 300 million very poor people; where hunger kills more people than infectious diseases do; where AIDS has killed 25 million and HIV infects 25 million more; where malaria—frigging malaria, curable, preventable!—is the leading cause of death among children age 5 or younger.

The data, as analyzed by another Boston-based Catholic academic pal of mine, Harvard's Professor Mary Jo Bane, include Catholics as large laggards in charitable giving and volunteer work. (And please, nobody say it's all due to reaction against pedophiles in the Church, because the damning data, save for Catholic congregation giving itself, have not changed much for over a decade).

The data include average Catholics who don't seem to get how radical their "faith without works" heritage is, and don't live like "deeds not words" radicals (my brief time in the White House taught me how "radical" I was on that point, but that's a longer story).

The data include big-brained Catholics—maybe some here tonight!?!—who talk and act like it is Athens or Jerusalem, like it's reason or religion, when it comes to motivating, justifying, or defending community or civic or political action.

Of course, the data also include, say, the Penn-Newman center's Father Charlie Zlock leading his flock to post-Katrina NOLA for alternate spring break; Catholic Charities of New Orleans leading the City's physical, human, and financial recovery process; Catholic hospitals fighting the good fight to serve all including elderly shut-ins and the poor; and—fill in blanks by the hundreds or thousands, at home and abroad.

But, honestly, if you were from Mars, and you were trying to divine American Catholic beliefs by observing our collective behavior, and you got the specs on this God of Abraham character and His Son Jesus Christ, would you infer from their behavior that Catholics are the humanoids who believe most sincerely that God is real, or that Jesus Christ is Who He says He is?

Maybe, but I doubt it, because we don't scream it, we don't shout it, and, increasingly, we do nothing—or precious little—about it.

It's with this in mind, not as some back-handed homage to evangelical brothers and sisters, that I call myself a “born-again Catholic.”

Yes, God is real.

And we Catholics need to lead a second civil rights movement with COGIC, one that reaches Black preschoolers in West Philly and Black children in West Africa alike.

Yes, God is real.

And we Catholics are sinning when we let anybody, including the prosperity Gospel preachers on television, lead literally millions of young people and families astray with garbage about God not wanting you to serve the poor, but wanting you to get rich.

Yes, God is real.

And He is not pleased for you to gripe about the working poor a short drive from here, or let you play at the Catholic version of “prophetic voice,” unless you get off your pathetic hind quarters and start a “How to get your EITC benefits” clinic via campus; have academically-based service learning classes that walk local ex-welfare mothers through the latest Food Stamps maze; mobilize your graduating seniors to teach in inner-city schools for real—no bickering for Teach For America gigs that yield much prestige but few long-term teachers; and whatever else you feel like doing for God's family from deep down in your souls.

## **God Knows About This Place**

Some months after my 1996 Palm Sunday moment, my elder son was with me on a short-cut ride home through the blighted North Philly neighborhood where the Gesu School is located. He was seven then; he's 17 now.

Stopped at a red light as it grew dark, he was in the back seat, staring at the ugly, rusted remnants at a playground, and watching kids meander. He had been learning about Jesus and doing little Bible studies things.

“Daddy,” he asked, “why are all the swings broken?” I glanced in the rearview at him but said nothing. “Daddy,” he continued, “where are those little boys going, it's getting too dark?” Still, I half-ignored him.

But as the light changed and I hit the gas, he got my attention.

“I guess the Christians don’t know about this place,” he said matter-of-factly.

Yes, they do.

Yes, God is real.

That’s why God sent us.

That’s why God gave us faith in reason, and reason for faith.

That’s why God granted us real Catholic community, if only we love each other as He loves us—  
unselfishly, Abba, Father, “Here I am Lord.”

Yes, God is real...and you can feel Him in a real Catholic faith community.

May God bless and protect you.

Thanks again.