Praise for *Catholics and Contempt*

"All those involved in Catholic media—not just professionals but any Catholic with a social media account—should be wary of a growing culture of contempt. Jesus teaches us to speak the truth in love, but some of our discourse has become toxic and obscene. In this helpful book, veteran Catholic journalist John Allen shines a light on this harrowing problem and offers a way out. Read this book and learn how to contribute to a culture of compassion."

—**Bishop Robert Reed**, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Boston, President of CatholicTV, Chairman of USCCB Committee on Communications

"When John Allen has something to say, we would all do well to listen. When John Allen has something to say about and to Catholic media, we would be fools not to pay attention. *Catholics and Contempt* is no mere condemnation meant to go viral, a punching down on fake news made by fake people. It offers an invitation, and a challenge, for Catholic media to be better, to strive to create good things, and to recognize the responsibility of sharing the truth of current moments and of the faith. This book is a gift, precisely because it reflects the very best of its author: it is challenging, measured, and sharp. I encourage you to pick it up, learn from it, and apply its lessons."

—**Katie Prejean McGrady**, author and host of *The Katie McGrady Show* on The Catholic Channel on SiriusXM

"John Allen offers a fascinating and insightful read that clarifies the confusion around some of the most explosive stories to have hit Catholic news. He presents a comprehensive lay of the land in Catholic media, provides a compelling perspective into the motives that drive and shape narratives, and calls for a cultural shift from contempt to honesty and respect. It is a timely read as we look for pathways forward that lead to a more healthy and unified Church."

—**Heather Khym**, cohost of the *Abiding Together* podcast

CATHOLICS & Contempt

How Catholic Media Fuel Today's Fights, and What to Do About It

John L. Allen Jr.

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Introduction

When I'm on the lecture circuit, I like to tell a joke that draws on my upbringing in rural western Kansas (i.e., farm country). To be honest, that part of the world isn't exactly a mecca for the tourism industry. The only time of year we tend to get many out-of-towners is in the fall, because that's pheasant hunting season and some guys like to roll out to the country for a weekend of hoisting shotguns and trying to bag some birds. (For those unschooled in such matters, a pheasant is a large, long-tailed game bird, somewhat like a turkey, and they're common on the high plains.) Generally these hunts involve vast amounts of beer, so often the hunters are a far greater threat to one another than to the pheasant population, but that doesn't stop them from coming.

The joke is set on one such hunting weekend, and it involves a lawyer who's trawling the fields of western Kansas in search of prey.

After a long and frustrating day, the lawyer finally flushes a few pheasants out of the wheat stalks. He takes aim and fires, and he sees one of the birds fall from the sky. He sets off to pick it up, but just as he reaches the spot where the bird has fallen, he comes across a

sign that's clearly labeled "Private Property, Keep Out." Since the bird is just a few feet away, however, he decides there's no harm in ignoring the sign and starts to climb the fence. As he does so, the farmer who owns the land rolls up in his tractor.

"Hey buddy, what do you think you're doing?" the farmer shouts.

"That's my bird," the lawyer says, pointing to the fallen pheasant, "and I'm going to pick it up."

"Look, that bird fell on my property, so it belongs to me," the farmer says.

The lawyer loses his patience, beginning to shout threats of lawsuits and crippling legal bills. The farmer smiles and then says, "Well, that may be how you do things where you come from, but around here we settle things with something called the three-kick rule."

Puzzled, the lawyer asks, "What's that?"

"I kick you three times, then you kick me three times, and we keep going . . . Eventually, whoever gives up loses," the farmer says.

The lawyer thinks about it, then decides he's younger and bigger than the farmer and could probably outlast him, so he agrees. The farmer hops off the tractor, the lawyer drops his shotgun and backpack, and they line up eye-to-eye.

"Are you ready?" the farmer asks.

"Go for it," the lawyer says.

Wearing a set of heavy, mud-clod work boots, the farmer gives the lawyer one hard kick in the shin,

eliciting piercing screams. He delivers another strong shot into the stomach, causing the lawyer to retch, and a third kick directly into the lawyer's backside, producing howls of pain that could be heard all the way to the Nebraska border. Finally, the lawyer is able to draw himself to his feet and dust himself off. Putting a look of grim determination on his face, he stares the farmer in the eye and says, "Alright, you old coot, now it's my turn."

Smiling, the farmer replies: "No, that's alright, I give up . . . You can have the bird!"

The joke works because we admire the farmer's cunning, and, let's face it, sometimes a swift kick in the backside is precisely what certain personality types need. Yet in reality, of course, such a rule wouldn't really settle anything, because the lawyer would feel cheated and humiliated and likely seek his revenge in other ways, escalating a small dispute over a single game bird into a much larger conflict.

If we look around the media landscape today, it seems we have created a virtual culture dominated by the three-kick rule. In social media, on cable talk shows, in newspaper editorials, and on internet blogs, it seems what drives traffic and lights up the scoreboard isn't a patient search for understanding, but rather cheap shots at people perceived to be political, ideological, and cultural enemies. Pundits and posters have turned into the farmer in that joke, ostensibly concerned with protecting our metaphorical birds but readily willing

to sacrifice them in exchange for the chance to inflict damage on people they don't like.

THE RISE OF "CHEAP SPEECH"

Back in 1995, at the dawn of the internet age, political scientist Eugene Volokh of UCLA coined the term "cheap speech" to refer to a new era in which the costs of delivering and consuming information would plummet, creating endless new supplies. Volokh saw "cheap speech" as a positive development, in the same sense that someone might predict that technological shifts would generate "cheap energy" or "cheap food"—that is, that the cost of a good thing will go down dramatically, meaning more people will be able to get it, and many people will be able to afford more of it. Over time, however, as another political scientist, Richard Hasen, has observed, information has become "cheap" in another sense too, meaning "tawdry," "unreliable," "without real value." It's as if, all of a sudden, food costs less, but there are no barriers to putting unsafe products on the market, so we all get sick—or energy costs less but is terribly dangerous, so our appliances blow up.

The reality behind "cheap speech" is that it's opened the door to a tidal wave of hate speech masquerading as reporting and disinformation disguised under a veneer of legitimacy. Although it's cheaper and easier to access information today, one could argue that consumers have never been as poorly informed, divided, and misled as

in the early part of the twenty-first century. For one thing, any CFO for a news organization will tell you that reporting is expensive, while opinion is cheap. If you want to document how a particular branch of the government (or, for that matter, of the Catholic Church) is using its money, for instance, you need a financial reporter with the capacity to spend time poring over publicly available financial disclosure forms and seeking leaks of bank records and wire transfers, probably buoyed at some point by the expertise of a forensic accountant. All in, you're looking at spending thousands, if not tens of thousands, on a single story. On the other hand, if you simply want a clickbait piece of opinion saying, "Governor So-and-So is a crook," you can get that for free without breaking a sweat. In an era in which traditional news organizations had the market for information cornered, they could afford to invest resources in stories that wouldn't be immediately usable and profitable; in an era of cheap speech, the incentives for that kind of in-depth reporting just aren't there.

Political scientists such as Hasen will tell you that cheap speech has other corrosive effects, including eroding what's known as the "loser's consent" essential to a democracy, in which people whose side loses an election accept the result as legitimate. As we'll see later, that consent is not only under pressure in the US with the "stop the steal" rhetoric of the Trump crowd; well before that, it took a hit in the Catholic Church with dark whispers of Pope Francis being elected irregularly and

Benedict XVI still being the canonically valid Supreme Pontiff. In addition, cheap speech also diminishes accountability, because when people are trained to see all speech as political, it becomes more difficult to expose real corruption and hold public officials accountable. It also undermines "voter competence," meaning the capacity of an ordinary person to make a rational political choice. That's tough, naturally, when his or her head is swimming with disinformation and demonization.

Perhaps most toxic is the way in which cheap speech has fueled the culture of contempt. In past eras, someone with an obvious axe to grind would have struggled to find the means to broadcast those resentments on a mass scale. It could be done, of course, but it required a certain level of determination and resourcefulness that many people either didn't possess or would choose not to invest in. Today, anger, snark, and derision can be broadcast in real time on a global scale at zero cost. Amid a welter of confusing and contradictory information streams, those outlets and individuals that provide the most provocative content, and the content most likely to confirm user prejudices, tend to be the ones who break through the noise and succeed. Cheap information, in other words, has made all of us cheaper.

THE "CULTURE OF CONTEMPT"

This lust to wound perceived opponents is part of what's often described as a "culture of contempt." The origins

of the phrase are a bit difficult to piece together, but it appears its first use in English dates to early efforts at Jewish-Christian dialogue in the immediate wake of the Second World War. Jules Isaac, a French Jewish historian who later played a key role in the document *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) on relations with Jews, referred to a "teaching of contempt" for Judaism in Christianity that, in turn, forged a "culture of contempt" within Christian-dominated Europe. Isaac suggested, and many Christian scholars agreed, this culture helped lay the foundations for the Holocaust.

The first usage of the phrase "culture of contempt" in a more explicitly political context seems to date to Thatcher-era England, where it was first employed by a pair of well-known Anglican thinkers, theologian David Nicholls and Archbishop John Habgood of York, to refer to what they regarded as the contemptuous fashion in which the Iron Lady treated her perceived political opponents. Meanwhile, Thatcher and her allies accused various forces in British society, including the national broadcaster BBC, of betraying a "culture of contempt" in the way they allegedly belittled anyone who didn't share their broadly progressive agenda.

More recently, Harvard social scientist Arthur Brooks has applied the phrase "culture of contempt" to the contemporary American situation in his 2019 book *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt*. A self-described

conservative, Brooks described this culture as "a noxious brew of anger and disgust"—not just for an opponent's ideas but for him or her as a person. He quotes Arthur Schopenhauer to the effect that contempt is "the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another."

Wherever the phrase comes from, today's widespread culture of contempt is global but tends to be especially prominent in the United States. A mounting body of research in political science appears to suggest that the nation is more polarized than at any point since the Civil War. One such finding is that in the wake of the 2016 election that brought Donald Trump to the White House, one in six Americans—that's a staggering forty-three million people, which is more than the entire population of Canada—stopped talking to a family member or close friend over political differences. Much of that is due to what eggheads call "motive attribution asymmetry," which means that we think our motives are pure and the other side's are evil. Those same eggheads say that levels of "motive attribution asymmetry" in the United States today are comparable to those between Israelis and Palestinians (i.e., really, really high). I don't quite know how they measure such things scientifically, but my gut tells me they're not far off.

When you think the other side is evil, then the proper reaction won't be just dismissal or disagreement; it will be outright contempt.

This culture of contempt is killing us, and not just in the metaphorical sense that it's made our politics

dysfunctional and coarsened our democracy to the point where forging consensus around anything is all but impossible. The American Psychological Association has published research that shows that feelings of contempt stimulate the body's production of two stress hormones, cortisol and adrenaline, and sustained high levels of those substances can lead to high blood pressure, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, and other chronic diseases. It may not be entirely a coincidence that, at a time when adult obesity is a huge health concern in America, cortisol is also known to stimulate appetite and to signal the body to shift the metabolism to store fat. Both physically and spiritually, in other words, contempt is toxic.

WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?

To some extent, the roots of today's culture of contempt may be technological. Every seismic technological shift has important cultural ramifications, and the rise of the internet and social media platforms is no exception. For one thing, the internet has removed all filters to communication, so that people can now instantly broadcast their thoughts about anything to a global audience, encouraging unreflective hair-trigger reactions. For another, digital media encourage anonymous communication; as the old saying goes, "On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog." Experience shows that people will say terrible things anonymously that they would never

dare utter face-to-face, and thus, in a sense, social media is designed to bring out the worst angels of our nature.

Technology drives the culture of contempt in another sense, due to the rise of complex digital algorithms that allow content to be driven to users based on their personal preferences. If someone goes online these days and reads one liberal website, algorithms dictate that more liberal offerings will appear in their search engines, in pop-ups that accompany the user wherever he or she migrates, and so on. Further, these algorithms are designed to drive traffic toward conflict, because online slugfests are perceived to elicit deeper engagement from users and thus to expose them to more digital advertising. One 2014 study found that Facebook promotes what the authors called "emotional contagion" because its algorithms favor content that produces an emotional response in the user, with the aim of keeping them on the platform as long as possible. Social media algorithms also are designed to prioritize content that draws high levels of engagement without any consideration as to whether that content is responsible or even true, which is likely why a 2016 study found that false information spread six times more quickly on Twitter than the truth. A 2017 Japanese study found that people of differing viewpoints only rarely discuss issues that overlap; more commonly, a Trump supporter may be following the latest breakdown in the immigration system, while Trump opponents chew over the latest data on climate change. Social media algorithms, whether we're talking about

Twitter's "who to follow" feature or YouTube's "watch history," tend to drive users deeper into discussions dominated by only one point of view.

An article in the November 2021 issue of the journal *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* put the consensus among researchers this way: "Although social media is unlikely to be the main driver of polarization," they concluded, "we posit that it is often a key facilitator." Confirming the point, a now-famous March 2020 study by the American Economic Association found that subjects who stayed off Facebook for an entire month exhibited "significantly reduced polarization of views on policy issues," even if basic differences rooted in partisan identity didn't disappear. (That's actually good news, by the way. The solution to polarization and tribalism can't be eliminating difference, reducing everything to a mushy lowest common denominator. Instead, it has to lie in the capacity to affirm one's own identity while, at the same time, remaining open and nonjudgmental about others. We'll have more about this later, but a compelling role model in that regard is St. John Paul II, whose Catholic identity was rock-solid but who also demonstrated a remarkable gift for dialogue.)

Another piece of the puzzle is sociological and demographic. In 2004, American journalist Bill Bishop began using the phrase "The Big Sort," which later became the title of his landmark book. Using sociological and demographic data, Bishop demonstrated that America was becoming a nation of gated communities

of both the physical and the virtual sort. The dominant trend in American sociology, Bishop suggested, was an accelerating tendency for people to live, work, recreate, and even worship only with people who think like themselves. Ironically, as America becomes more and more diverse overall, our neighborhoods, social circles, markets, and even media platforms are becoming steadily more homogenous, designed to appeal not to a broad cross-section but to a narrowly defined niche.

If there's one consistent finding from decades of sociological research about the effects of this sort of physical and psychological segregation, it's this: homogenous communities radicalize; heterogenous communities moderate. In a homogenous environment in which everyone basically agrees on the core ideas, the social rewards come from stating ever more emphatic and radical versions of those core ideas. In more mixed environments marked by constant tensions over core ideas, the social rewards tend to flow to those with the capacity to forge consensus and to defuse conflict. It's no accident that at the same time Americans have been cocooning themselves ever more deeply into what marketers call their "affinity communities," the country is also reaching new heights of polarization and mistrust.

There's also, inevitably, an economic factor to the rise of the culture of contempt. Almost twenty years ago, the late novelist Michael Crichton, of *Jurassic Park* fame, published a novel called *State of Fear*, the central thesis of which was that the military-industrial complex

famously described by President Dwight Eisenhower at the peak of the Cold War has been supplanted as the dominant unseen force in American life by a new "politico-legal-media" complex, which thrives by creating a perpetual state of fear. The novel was deeply controversial, mostly because the example of an artificial fear Crichton chose was global warming, and, of course, there's abundant evidence that concern about a warming earth and its potential consequences isn't actually artificial at all. Yet if you take the word "fear" and swap it out for "rage"—and, of course, the two are related—Crichton's diagnosis seems a prescient way of describing the current situation. In the early twenty-first century, perhaps the greatest boom industry of all is the manufacture and sale of outrage, fueled by a 24/7 cycle of punditry on television and in digital media constantly reminding consumers of why they ought to be angry at someone or something, often by amplifying the voices of politicians and lawyers with a similar vested interest in stirring the pot.

As part of the Big Sort, Americans have come to rely on media outlets selected on the basis of ideological affinity for most of their news, which creates a clear economic incentive for journalists to abandon the traditional values of fairness and objectivity and to instead frame stories in ways their audiences are likely to favor. To put the point more bluntly, making people mad is a good business model. It drives traffic, sells ads, and puts money in the bank. The financial rewards for trying to

be a voice of reason and moderation in this environment are far less clear. Media organizations that take a clear party line can rely on a dedicated audience willing to pay for their product, as well as the support of powerful and deep-pocketed foundations and patrons. Platforms that don't have such a partisan affiliation struggle to find similar means of support, since the problem with moderates is that few of them are truly passionate about their moderation.

A century ago, G.K. Chesterton mockingly defined journalism as "largely consisting of saying 'Lord Jones is Dead' to people who never knew that Lord Jones was alive." Today, we might say it's the fine art of saying "Lord Jones is a jerk" to people who already thought so but are thrilled to have it confirmed.

THE CATHOLIC SCENE

That's the broad social landscape, but what about the Catholic component?

In general, the Catholic Church understands itself to be an evangelizer of culture, striving to transform whatever society it's in through the lens of the Gospel. Yet in many ways the Church is also evangelized by culture, often unconsciously absorbing assumptions, priorities, and patterns of behavior from the surrounding cultural milieu. Today's prevailing culture of contempt is a good case in point, because we see it in a distressing range of Catholic media platforms and individual

Catholic commentators too. In some ways, the Church has reproduced these broad social trends within its own fold, and with exacting fidelity.

If that all seems abstract, let me offer a concrete case in point drawn from my personal experience.

First, some background. In 2019, my now ex-wife asked me for a divorce. After discussing the matter, we agreed to file for divorce in the state of Colorado, which is where we lived at the time. Our separation was entirely amicable, and we remain good friends. Subsequent to that decision, I began dating a longtime friend and colleague in Rome who was also a coworker at Crux, and we eventually decided to get married. After obtaining an annulment from my previous marriage, which was not conducted in the Catholic Church (my ex-wife is not Catholic), Elise and I were married on January 25, 2020.

As this situation was unfolding, a well-known Catholic pundit named Michael Voris, who founded the conservative platform Church Militant, published a column in which he suggested I had "dumped" my wife and "shacked up" with another woman, charged that I was "objectively committing adultery," and accused me of "willful sin." Because I was living in blatant contradiction to Church teaching, he wrote, my analysis on issues in Catholicism was not to be trusted.

As the old saying goes, everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts. Voris is obviously entitled to his own point of view about the quality of

my analysis, and God knows there are days when even I question my judgment. However, his column contained a couple of key factual errors and several important omissions.

To begin with, I had not "dumped" my wife. Rather, she had initiated our divorce and it was mutually agreed upon at every stage. In addition, Elise and I were not "shacked up" but maintained separate apartments in Rome and never even spent a night together prior to our wedding. Without going into unnecessary detail, I can say with a clear conscience there was no adultery involved.

It's also relevant to add that I pursued and obtained an annulment in keeping with Church teaching, Elise and I underwent marriage preparation under the guidance of an experienced priest, and we were married in the Church in a Mass concelebrated by four priests, including one who is an academic theologian well versed in Catholic doctrine on marriage, and another who is a priest of Opus Dei, a group not exactly known for being casual about the moral demands of the faith. Voris would have known all of that had he done even minimal reporting for his piece, but he never spoke to me, to my ex-wife, or to Elise . . . or, so far as I could tell, to anyone else involved. My impression is that Voris picked up a rumor from someone in Rome and wrote it up without doing any of the fact-checking that, not so long ago, would have been required for such a directly personal attack to be published.

In reality, it seemed clear the aim of the column was not dispassionate reporting, but rather wounding perceived professional and ideological rivals. In all honesty, Elise and I were actually something akin to collateral damage, since the column appeared not long after I was named a Fellow at the Word on Fire Institute created by Bishop Robert Barron. I did a Q&A book with Barron in 2017 titled *To Light a Fire on the Earth*, exploring his approach to drawing people to the faith. Voris is not a Barron fan, repeatedly attacking him for being, in Voris' words, "infected with modernism" and promoting what Voris derides as "Catholicism lite."

His conclusion in the column about my alleged infidelity was telling: "This tidy little arrangement between Allen and Barron calls into serious question Barron's legitimacy."

In other words, this was contempt masquerading as journalism. Elise and I got lucky, in the sense that many of our colleagues in the English-language press know us and therefore knew Voris' account to be factually off-base. As a result, no one else picked up the story, and it just sort of died on the vine. Many others we know haven't been so fortunate. Yet I confess that, even years later, it's slightly hurtful that you can still find Voris' piece online, with no correction suggesting there's a problem with the account.

In a sense, it's easy to write off a platform such as Church Militant for its in-your-face extremism. Yet the reality is that Church Militant is no more than a sort

of unintentional reductio ad absurdum of the broader realities of much Catholic media in the early twenty-first century. In less extreme and more sophisticated fashion, virtually all Catholic media outlets today in the English language tend to have a clear party affiliation. Consumers know which are the conservative outlets and which the liberal ones, and they tend to craft their preferences accordingly. Moreover, those outlets today often provide greater latitude for personal attacks than previously would have been considered appropriate either on journalistic or Catholic grounds. In addition, many of these reporters and analysts also have an active social media presence, and in that arena, they often engage in contests to see who can deliver the snarkiest put-downs of perceived opponents in a fashion that no serious journalist would have imagined doing not so long ago.

To be fair, it probably isn't terribly surprising that discussions of Catholicism tend to bring out the negative features of modern communications in a particularly concentrated form, since religion generally stirs the deepest passions of the human heart. Catholicism is actually fortunate that so many people care so deeply about the Church's future, seeking by their own lights to push it to become the best version of itself. Yet Catholicism is also called to purify culture, not to uncritically absorb it, and, let's face it, the media culture of the moment is badly in need of some purification.

In a nutshell, that's what this book is about: how Catholics might be part of the solution to the "culture of contempt" rather than one of its striking examples.

Before moving on, let me address an objection to this critique of the culture of contempt that I hear frequently whenever I discuss it, from smart and well-intentioned Catholics on both the right and the left: "Okay, I get it. We could be nicer. But when facing lies, hypocrisy, heresy, and corruption, isn't contempt actually in order? Shouldn't we be bold in proclaiming the truth of the Gospel? I mean, wasn't St. Catherine of Siena at least a little bit contemptuous when she warned Pope Gregory XI that if he didn't use his authority to defend the truth, God would do it for him through all manner of punishments? I'd rather be accused of contempt than cowardice in the face of evil."

Many years ago, I interviewed someone in a conservative Catholic activist group who had been involved in bringing charges of sexual abuse against Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, the bête noire of a certain generation of American Catholic conservatives both for his advocacy of a "seamless garment" approach to Catholic social teaching, which critics saw as tantamount to going soft on abortion, and for his Common Ground initiative, which in the eyes of many conservatives sought to make dissent and error as legitimate as authentic Catholic doctrine. Those charges were later withdrawn when therapists judged the accuser's claim of repressed memories about Bernardin unreliable, but

we didn't know that at the time of our interview. Among other things, the activist openly described going through the trash of prelates they suspected of either misconduct or doctrinal error, looking for dirt. When I pressed about whether that was just a little sleazy, the answer was something like, "Sure it is, but in the face of evil, you have to pull out all the stops." (By the way, despite the fact that the accuser recanted, Church Militant still has a page describing Bernardin as a "homosexual predator Satanist," asserting, among other things, that not only was Bernardin's abusive behavior covered up, but it often came in the context of Satanic rituals. That's based on the claims of two accusers, without any clear attempt at independent verification.)

Here's my response: Yes, evil merits contempt, but people don't. People must always be respected for their inherent dignity, however wrongheaded they may be on particular points. Moreover, I've been a professional communicator for the better part of thirty years, and I've rarely seen a situation in which shouting "You're evil!" at someone changes hearts and minds. Indeed, styling opponents as malicious usually has more impact on the persons leveling the accusation than on the accused, turning the former into nasty and embittered people incapable of acknowledging the genuine good that so often coexists with error and sin. St. Thomas Aquinas famously said that every virtue carries a corresponding vice, which is what you get when you push the virtue too far or exalt it above all the others. In that sense, we could

say that the culture of contempt is a vicious distortion of boldness in defense of truth, not its logical conclusion, and, like every other vice, it festers if left unaddressed. So, let's address it.

Before proceeding to do just that, I need to put a few disclaimers on the record.

First, I believe in objectivity as a journalistic ideal, though I know it's asymptotic; you can get closer to it, but you never actually reach it because, inevitably, one's experience and outlook and sense of priorities come into play. As Hunter S. Thompson once memorably said, "With the possible exception of things like box scores, race results, and stock market tabulations, there is no such thing as Objective Journalism. The phrase itself is a pompous contradiction in terms."

Anyway, on the subject of the Catholic press, I can claim no objectivity whatsoever, because I'm the dictionary definition of an insider. I published my first article in the *National Catholic Reporter* when I was thirty, and I'm fifty-seven today, so I've been covering the Church for the better part of thirty years. Although I do occasional TV bits for CNN as their Senior Vatican Analyst and had a brief run as an Associate Editor with the *Boston Globe*, the vast majority of my work has been for explicitly Catholic media platforms: first NCR for seventeen years and then, for the last eight years, with my own news organization, Crux. I believe deeply in the mission of the Catholic press, and I have strong views about what's gone wrong and what needs to change. All

this is deeply personal, in other words, and while I'll try to be as fair as possible along the way, I can't pretend to be dispassionate.

As a related point, I should also add that I have a clear financial interest in this discussion. My platform, Crux, was founded as an experiment in nonpartisan Catholic journalism, and, obviously, should more people be persuaded of the case for it, more people might read our site and contribute to our fundraising campaigns. To be clear, Crux is hardly the only example of responsible Catholic journalism out there, and we don't always live up to our own aspirations. Were the environment in Catholic media to shift without Crux reaping any direct financial benefit, I'd still be thrilled. Nonetheless, the reporter in me always screams "Follow the money," and I can't deny that a less contemptuous media climate probably would be good for our bottom line.

Second, I just mentioned that I'm pulling up on sixty, and I can't rule out that I'm suffering from the usual malady of people as they age, which is thinking everything was so much better when I was younger and the whole world is going to hell. My disdain for social media, for instance, probably is rooted in age as much as experience; frankly, I probably shouldn't be pontificating on the dynamics of social media at all, since I spend as little time in that world as possible. So, if much of this strikes you as the grumblings of an old fogey, you may not be entirely wrong.

Third, I'm often a perfect example of the "Do as I say, not as I do" rule. Over the years, many people who have read my work or seen me on TV or in person at a speaking gig have observed that I can come off as awfully contemptuous of people I think are promoting contempt. Many years ago, for example, I coined the phrase "Taliban Catholics" in a talk at the University of Dallas to describe what I called "a distorted, angry form of the faith that knows only how to excoriate, condemn, and smash the TV sets of the modern world." I didn't name anyone specifically, but both on the UD campus and in wider Catholic conversation, many people seemed to think I was talking about them—and, in some cases, they were probably right. The phrase produced backlash, hard feelings, and deeper division, which in some circles linger to this day—precisely the opposite, in other words, of the outcome I was allegedly trying to promote. It was a great soundbite, but it stoked the Catholic culture of contempt. I've regretted it ever since, but that's another unfortunate thing about the internet: once something is out there, it stays there forever.

I can be my own worst enemy in another sense too, in that I have a pedantic streak a mile wide, and I have a tendency to think that the mere display of obscure information somehow amounts to wisdom. I can come off as annoyingly professorial, suggesting that anyone who doesn't see things my way is that student in the back of the class who's just a little bit slower than the smart kids. To imply that disagreement is equivalent

to stupidity, needless to say, doesn't do a great deal to counteract the culture of contempt either.

All that said, I'm going to forge ahead anyway, because what's at stake is simply too important.

As a Catholic, it's always painful to have to acknowledge that the Church has failed to live up to its mission to be the sacrament of the kingdom of God on earth. We've been forced to that realization by the clerical sexual abuse scandals, for instance, and facing the ugly truths of those scandals remains a work in progress. In a similar fashion, we also must face the hard truth that in the division, tribalism, acrimony, and resentment Catholics often show for one another, especially in the digital realm, we also fail to be that sacrament of the fundamental unity of the human family. We should feel the same sense of urgency about reform in facing the culture of contempt as we do regarding the distorted clericalism, institutional defensiveness, and moral laxity that produced the abuse crisis.

You don't have to be a Catholic believer, however, to regard the Church's internal culture of contempt as worrying. To employ the categories made famous by Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye, the Catholic Church is arguably the world's most important "soft power," leading not by force of arms or economic might, but rather by the power of its ideas and its example. Catholicism is the lone institution nurtured in the West that is today truly global, with two-thirds of its membership of 1.3 billion people now found in the

southern hemisphere. Further, the Catholic Church is also the largest nongovernmental provider of charitable and humanitarian assistance in the world. To take just one example, it's estimated that the Church delivers 25 percent of all AIDS treatments worldwide, a share that can rise to 50 percent or more across much of sub-Saharan Africa. Countless such contributions add up to the Catholic Church being an enormous force for good and, given the Church's demographics, one of the few institutions capable of promoting real global solidarity.

The bottom line is that, believer or not, we all have an interest in seeing the Catholic Church reach its full potential. The Church cannot do so, however, as long as a large share of its energy and resources is devoted to tearing other Catholics down.

The media did not create this culture of contempt, and we're not uniquely responsible for sustaining it. No solution will be complete if it focuses exclusively on media platforms, ignoring all the other arenas in which rancor and resentment bubble up these days—above all, of course, the individual human heart. Nonetheless, the media is the focus of this book because it's the world I know best, and it also has an outsized responsibility in shaping Catholic attitudes and public behavior.

Another stipulation: By "media" in this book, I mostly mean news organizations and platforms, not individual users of social media and not producers of other forms of media content. I won't be covering Catholic evangelization outlets, for example, or Catholic

entertainment sites, or writers on spirituality, theology, or other specialized Catholic interests, except as they intersect with news coverage. It tends to be matters of news interest that produce the most intensely polarized attitudes and reactions, and it's often discussion of news stories that generate the greatest rancor.

Let me sketch what you'll find in the pages to follow.

We begin with a basic mission statement for the Catholic press, because it's impossible to evaluate how we're doing if we don't know what it is we're trying to accomplish in the first place. To be clear, there is no set of commandments for Catholic media that came down off a mountain carved into stone by the finger of God. Crafting a mission statement is a subjective enterprise, and there's no doubt that if I got ten Catholic journos into a room and gave them my version, they'd wordsmith it to such an extent that it would be almost unrecognizable when it came out on the other end. Nevertheless, it's important for me to lay out my vision of the role the Catholic press can and should play, because that will make the analysis to follow far clearer—and, anyway, the aim of this book isn't to close a conversation; it's to open one.

Next, I offer a broad survey of the landscape in the Catholic press today, looking not just at the United States but the global situation. That bit of global perspective is important, and not just for the empirical reason that the vast majority of movers and shakers in

the Catholic Church aren't American and aren't getting their news exclusively, or even primarily, from American outlets. Although it's a fact of life that American Catholics represent only 6 percent of the global Catholic population of 1.3 billion today, you'd never know it from much American discussion, which tends to assume that our experiences, perspectives, and instincts are normative for the entire world. It's par for the course here in Rome, for instance, for me to run into Catholics who read the *National Catholic Reporter* from the US or *La Croix* from France along with *Avvenire* and the other Italian Catholic media; to be honest, I rarely run into American Catholics who are reading *Avvenire* along with whatever American platforms they use. Simply as a matter of understanding the Church, therefore, it's good for Americans to be exposed to what the rest of the Catholic world is reading and watching.

Much of the rest of the book is composed of case studies, meaning specific stories that have arisen over the years, how the Catholic press has handled them, and what sort of reactions those stories have generated based upon the way they were shaped by various reporters and commentators. The aim here is not to single anyone out as uniquely responsible for the culture of contempt. No questionable judgment I'll describe in these case studies is something that, on a bad day, I wouldn't be capable of myself. Things would be much simpler if it were a matter of bad people knowingly pushing us down a path of self-destruction, but the reality is that it's more often

people driven by noble motives and trying their best to serve the greater good.

Before moving on, a quick explanation about how these case studies were chosen. We begin with the infamous Boffo case in Italy because it set the paradigm for much that would follow. Then we address the massively distorting narratives about two popes, Benedict XVI and Francis, that have circulated in some quarters, because from a media point of view the pope pretty much is the Catholic Church, at least in terms of much media interest, and so these narratives are unavoidable. Finally, we close with a couple of examples that hit a bit closer to home, in the sense that they're contemporary and North American, and are representative of a growing share of what's out there. Some readers may object that of the five case studies, at least three come from an identifiably "conservative" platform, while only one stems from clearly liberal quarters. Honestly, that was unintentional; they just seemed the best examples I had at hand. It may also reflect the tendency, however, that while individual liberal commentators can be awfully contemptuous of their perceived enemies, the Catholic left generally doesn't launch its own media outlets in quite the same way the right does—or, to put it differently, many on the Catholic right are convinced that the left already controls the establishment media, so they're more inclined to fund feisty alternatives. In any event, I'm not trying to blame the right for our problems so much as to sketch tendencies that apply, sometimes

in different ways, to all Catholic media regardless of editorial line.

Finally, we'll close with a few thoughts about how the Catholic press might counteract rather than drive the culture of contempt. I might as well confess in advance that none of what I'll have to say is particularly original, and none of it adds up to a magic bullet that will make all our problems go away. Again, the press didn't create this situation by itself, and it certainly can't solve it alone. At its very best, the press can simply provide some basic elements for positive social change, mostly the information needed to think clearly about what's happening and a common space where that information can be discussed in constructive fashion. What happens after that, as ever, belongs not in the hands of pundits but ordinary people.

I do want to read an important caveat into the record. This book is intended to raise awareness of certain troubling trends in the Catholic media these days that, for the most part, simply reflect trends in the broader media culture. I do not want that to be taken, however, as an indictment of the women and men who work in the Catholic press, or who cover the Catholic Church for other news outlets. We are all, always, children of our times, but for the most part my colleagues on the Catholic beat are among the most talented, dedicated, and productive professionals I've ever known. Whatever flaws exist in the Catholic media today, they're in spite

of the human qualities of most Catholic journalists, not because of them.

That said, after more than twenty years of abject failure in trying to change the polarized climate in Catholic discussion myself, I remain anchored in the conviction that an independent and responsible press is a sine qua non for a healthy society of any sort, whether secular or ecclesiastical, and that good journalism can change the world.

Just a few notes of gratitude before we get underway.

First, I want to thank all those colleagues in both the Catholic and secular press who have helped show me the way over the years, especially my former editors at the *National Catholic Reporter*. When I started out at NCR, the internet was still on the horizon and the paper was a weekly, biweekly over the summer, so there was always plenty of time for the managing editor to tear my stories apart and force me to rebuild them better. Pam Schaeffer and Tom Roberts did an exceptional job in that regard, and they'll forever have my gratitude. I also want to thank my Italian colleagues who took me in when I first got to Rome and showed me the ropes, especially the late, great Orazio Petrosillo, in whose shadow I've always felt I stand. I also want to thank my family at Crux, including a couple members who have moved on to greener pastures, for tolerating my vast aspirations coupled with my chronic inability to manage my way out of a paper bag.

I also want to thank the people at the Word on Fire Institute for making me their St. Francis de Sales Fellow of Media and Communications, and for publishing this book. I should emphasize that the views expressed here are exclusively my own, so if I miss the mark, blame me and not them. Bishop Robert Barron, the founder of Word on Fire and probably America's most gifted Catholic communicator, has done more than just about anyone else to name the culture of contempt in the Church and to solicit creative thinking about what to do about it, and I want this book to be one reply to that invitation.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Elise, for sharing this journey. Why she would choose to align her fortunes with a curmudgeonly, aging scrivener like me, deeply set in his ways and an antisocial only child to the core—who, according to one fairly contemptuous commentator on the internet, also bears a striking physical resemblance to the character Squidward on *SpongeBob SquarePants*—is utterly beyond my comprehension. She's a great asset for Crux, sure, but to me she's my world, and nothing I do, this book very much included, would be possible without her.

Now, as the Italians would say, *buona lettura*—have a good read!