

A New Magazine

[Review of] *Convivium: Faith in Our Common Life*, edited by Father Raymond de Sousa; preview issue, October 2011; annual subscription: \$30.

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by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

THIS PREVIEW issue is designed to lure its readers into subscribing to a new bimonthly magazine that will be launched officially early next year. A subscription includes membership in Cardus, for the magazine is one project of many arising from that “community,” which describes itself as “a North American public policy think tank equipping change agents with strategic public theology.” In an interview published here, its president, Michael van Pelt, describes Cardus as having originated in the Reformed Christian tradition and then expanding “into the evangelical world, into the Anglican world, into the Catholic world,” a ecumenical approach that is evident in this preview issue.

The editor is a Catholic priest, well known for his regular column in *The National Post*. His friendship with and admiration for the late Father John Neuhaus, founding editor of the American periodical *First Things*, is evident. Father de Sousa’s two pieces—“Small Talk” and “From Sea to Sea”—for instance, are reminiscent of Neuhaus’s “The Public Square,” a regular feature in which more or less brief comments are made on a series of current issues. They can be perceptive, as in de Sousa’s paragraphs on Marshall McLuhan, which make a connection between the production of a magazine and McLuhan’s insight into the sacramental implications of the incarnation: in Jesus, superlatively, the “medium is the message.” Similar, the commentary on the death and state funeral of Jack Layton provides an occasion for a reflection of the substitution of politics for religion in Canada.

The articles, generally on the short side, would have profited from a bigger dose of philosophy—and theology. I wonder, for instance, if “Mass Renewal” by Ottawa’s Archbishop Terrence Prendergast was not originally prepared for his diocese. His threefold theme—the new translation of the Mass, the arrival of the Jesuits in Canada, and his own religious

development—presumes too much, in interest and knowledge, from a reader who is not Catholic. Similarly, Bill Blaikie’s “The God Squad Has a Left Wing Too” regrets the movement of the churches away from the concerted concern for social justice that goes back to prophetic figures such as Tommy Douglas. The issue is obviously important to Blaikie, a former MP, a prominent member of the NDP, and a minister of the United Church. Again, however, one would expect something more analytical by way of a discussion of the main reason for the change, namely, radical differences that have developed among Christians in matters both doctrinal and moral. Given the nature of the magazine and the Cardus project as a whole, however, I suspect that it was editorial interference that put a check on Mr. Blaikie’s interest in such topics. Also Peter Menzies’ piece about life in the far north, “Common Life,” leaves the door slightly ajar on a vital topic—man as the steward of creation—but without really making use of the opportunity provided by his topic to explore the limitations as well as the opportunities for human ingenuity in the exploitation of natural resources. Furthermore, his closing remarks left me bemused:

Much that was done should not have been done and much that should have been done should have been done better. The evidence of those lessons is already clear in that which is and is about to be done in ways that follow how it was willed to be and therefore shall be done.

Two articles remain to be noted, “Good News in the Newsroom” (Charles Lewis) and “The Torments of China’s Religious Believers” (Jan Harvey and David Kilgour). The former, by the religious editor of *The National Post*, is an entertaining account of religion in “The Public Square” as seen from the perspective of an insider, in two senses: a believer and a reporter. Lewis also describes the all-too-familiar incredulity tinged with contempt with which members of the media regard a committed Christian. The article about China is a chilling account of the steadily increasing persecution of religion by a brutal regime. I could not help thinking of the international outrage that in 1991 finally brought South Africa’s policy of *apartheid* crashing down. While one can only applaud the end of an obvious injustice, a question must arise in the mind of any thoughtful person: Why have the greater atrocities of China and, for that matter, Moslem countries been consistently downplayed or ignored? An answer springs immediately to mind: South African international trade is insignificant; nor does it export oil.

Cardus is a multi-media project, smartly produced and very much *au*

courant. Surprisingly *Convivium* seems a little old fashioned. One might be able to justify not reviewing books, but where are the articles about cell phones, iPods, tweeters, etc.? Nevertheless, whatever the specifics of future issues, the principles that govern *Convivium* and the whole Cardus project are sound and acceptable. The new magazine thus provides a nice complement to other Catholic publications, such as *Catholic Insight*, and can be recommended to their readers and indeed to all of us. 