ESSAY · IN THE REGISTER OF WALKER PERCY'S *LOST IN THE COSMOS*

# The Temple of the Lord

*A self-help quiz for the unravelling. People are coming back to church because the world is coming apart. Some of them are looking for a fire. Some are looking for one more institution to keep them safe. Check one.*

Richard Verver · November 2026

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> *Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these.*
> — Jeremiah 7:4

> *But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones.*
> — Jeremiah 20:9

The form is borrowed from Walker Percy, who in 1983 wrote a self-help book that was a book of quizzes, *Lost in the Cosmos*, and twelve years before that a novel about a bad Catholic at a time near the end of the world, *Love in the Ruins*. Neither is quoted here; both are described, and the argument and its errors are mine. Scripture is quoted from the King James Version. On the Church the essay stays within what the Church teaches of herself: her forms belong to this passing age (*Lumen gentium* 48); she herself does not fail (Matthew 16:18); and she enters glory only by following her Lord through death (CCC 677).

## Preface: has it happened at last?

*Love in the Ruins* opens with a doctor coming to himself in a grove of young pines, somewhere near the end of what he calls the old violent beloved country, and asking whether it has finally happened. He has a rifle, a bottle, and a theory. He is a psychiatrist, a lapsed Catholic who still believes, and the inventor of a machine he calls the lapsometer, after *lapsus*, the fall. You touch it to a man's head and it tells you how far he has slid.

Percy published it in 1971. It reads now like the weather.

Everyone can feel it. The things that were supposed to hold are not holding: the money, the news, the alliances, the ordinary assumption that next year will look roughly like this one. And in the middle of this, a strange thing is happening in the churches. People are coming back. Young men in particular, it is reported, are appearing at Mass in numbers nobody forecast: kneeling, learning the Latin responses, asking where the confessional is and what you say once you are inside it.

This is good news. It may also be a trap. Everything depends on what they came for.

The following quiz is designed to help you find out. Answer honestly. There is no one watching but God, who already knows, and is not grading.

## Quiz I. Why did you come back?

You have started going to Mass again after some years away. Which of the following best describes why? Check one.

a. Everything else is falling apart, and the Church has been here for two thousand years. It will probably be here for two thousand more. It feels solid.

b. You like the order of it. The Latin, the vestments, the silence, the sense that somebody, somewhere, still knows how a thing ought to be done.

c. Your side needs institutions, and this is a big one.

d. You were lonely, and the people were kind.

e. Something is burning in you and you do not know what it is, and this is the only place that seems to know its name.

f. You have read *Love in the Ruins*, and you would like to be the remnant.

Commentary. None of these is wrong to feel, and the first four are how most of us come. God uses whatever door we will walk through; he is not proud about doors. But notice what (a), (b) and (c) have in common. Each asks the Church to do exactly what the falling institutions were doing before they fell: to hold, to endure, to keep you safe. Each wants a temple.

Jeremiah stood in the gate of a temple like that and told the people coming in for safety that they were trusting in lying words. The lying words were the temple's own name, said three times over, the way you say a charm: *the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD*. It was the true temple. God really dwelt there; the prophet never denied it. And the people had made it into insurance. They stole, and murdered, and swore falsely, and walked up the hill and stood in the house and said: we are delivered. "Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?" (Jer 7:11). Six centuries later another prophet would quote that verse while turning over the tables.

In Percy's novel the Church has split. The larger part has become the American Catholic Church, with headquarters in Cicero, Illinois, and a feast on its calendar called Property Rights Sunday. It is an institution that keeps people safe, and it is doing very well. The remnant carries on in a half-empty parish under a priest who freezes in the pulpit mid-sentence and says the trouble is principalities and powers. Percy is not subtle about which one is the Church.

Francis named the same temptation without the satire. There is a worldliness, he said, "which hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church," and it "consists in seeking not the Lord's glory but human glory and personal well-being" (*Evangelii gaudium* 93). Personal well-being is the bunker. It can be built out of incense as easily as out of canned goods.

And (f) is the trick answer, the kind Percy slipped into every quiz for the reader honest enough to admit he is not being honest. The remnant is a temple too. A man can trust in being one of the few exactly the way Jerusalem trusted in its walls. Percy would have liked the young men at the Latin Mass, the order and the vestments and the seriousness, and he would still have wired them to the lapsometer. He would have wired himself to it first. The needle twitches for all of us.

Answer (e) is the only one that does not want a temple. It wants the fire. Hold on to it. We will need it at the end.

## Quiz II. Which prophet do you prefer?

Two speakers are booked at your parish for the same Saturday. Which talk do you attend?

a. "Peace, Peace: Why the Crisis Will Pass, and How to Be Ready When Things Return to Normal." Refreshments to follow.

b. "The Old Order Is Not Coming Back." No refreshments. The speaker has been in prison.

Commentary. Jeremiah's rivals were not atheists. They were prophets, with credentials, who spoke in the name of the Lord, and what they said was that the trouble would be over in two years, the exiles home, the temple vessels back on their shelves. They "healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace" (Jer 6:14). *Slightly* is the word to keep: a wound dressed and not cleaned. They were popular. Jeremiah was let down by ropes into a cistern and sank in the mud.

The temptation now is the same one. Treat the unravelling as an interruption, and spend your whole strength bargaining with the corpse of the old order so that it will sit up and speak again: the empires, the systems, the certainties, the market that always comes back. A great deal of religious energy is going into this, and some of it calls itself orthodox. But the forms of this age were always going to pass. The Council said so of the Church's own forms, which are holier than the West's: her sacraments and institutions "pertain to this present time" and carry "the appearance of this world which is passing" (*Lumen gentium* 48). If that is true of the altar rail, it is true of the stock exchange.

In 1969 a young German theologian said on the radio that the Church would become small. She would lose many of her social privileges; she would no longer be able to inhabit many of the buildings she had put up in prosperity; and what remained would be "not the Church of the political cult, which is dead already, but the Church of faith," which would be seen again "as man's home." He later became pope. The talk has since been quoted so often, in so many bulletins and blog posts, that it has become a small

temple of its own: a prophecy people recite in order to feel safely on the right side of the collapse. Percy would have enjoyed that very much. It does not make the talk less true. He was attending (b).

## Quiz III. What is happening to the wheat?

You are standing on a threshing floor at harvest. The wind is up. Someone is throwing the grain into the air with a fork, and the husks are lifting off and blowing away across the field. Which best describes what is happening?

a. The harvest is being destroyed.

b. The wheat is being separated from what is not wheat.

c. You are being thrown into the air, and you would like to come down now.

Commentary. (c) is honest and (b) is true, and the point of the quiz is that they are one event. Jeremiah heard God say of Judah, "I will fan them with a fan in the gates of the land" (Jer 15:7). John the Baptist said the one coming after him would have his fan in his hand, "and he will throughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner" (Mt 3:12). In the same breath he said what that one would baptize with: "the Holy Ghost, and with fire" (Mt 3:11). The winnowing and the baptism are the same sentence.

The unravelling feels like chaos winning. It is also a winnowing: the terrible removal of everything we had mistaken for God. Our wealth, our technical mastery, our political stability, our sense of control, and, for some of us, our religion, insofar as our religion was one more of those things in a cassock. What blows away was husk. What remains is what was always going to remain.

But do not be too quick to decide which you are, or to suppose that the wheat gets off lightly. The fire John promised does not stop at the chaff. Wheat is not gathered into the barn to be admired. It is ground, and baked, and before any of that it is buried. "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (John 12:24). The winnowing spares no one the fire. It only decides what the fire is for.

None of this feels like harvest from the air.

## Quiz IV. The lapsometer

Dr. More fixes the electrodes of his lapsometer to your scalp and asks you to think about the collapse of the world. The needle moves. Which way?

a. Up. You find yourself floating above it all. You have read a great deal. You understand the collapse better than the people inside it. You are beginning to suspect that you, at least, have already passed through.

b. Down. You find yourself thinking about the generator, the pantry, the gun safe, the property line, the price of gold.

c. The needle does not move. You are thinking about your neighbour, who is sick, and whether you should bring soup.

Commentary. Percy named the two great flights of the modern self. He called the first angelism: the mind floating free of the body, abstracting, seeing everything and touching nothing, carrying on as if it were already a pure spirit. He called the second bestialism: the self sinking into the body's appetites and comforts, the full belly, the locked door. They look like opposites. They are the same refusal. Both are ways of not being where you are, as what you are, in the flesh, on the day you were given.

In a time of unravelling, angelism says: I have risen above it. Bestialism says: I have provided against it. Neither stays on the threshing floor. Neither goes to the cross. And both can be practised inside a church, on your knees. There is a pious angelism that treats the faith as altitude, and a pious bestialism that treats the parish as a fortress with a good kitchen.

The Christian answer is neither up nor down. It is the needle that does not move, and it does not move because the man is not thinking about himself at all. He is thinking about the soup.

## Quiz V. The fire

The temple has fallen. The vessels have been carried off to Babylon. The king is blind and in chains. Where is God?

a. In the rubble, waiting for the temple to be rebuilt.

b. In Babylon, with the vessels.

c. In Jeremiah's bones.

Commentary. Jeremiah tried to stop. He was mocked all day; he cursed the day he was born; he resolved that he would not mention God again, or speak any more in his name. "But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay" (Jer 20:9). That is (c). It is the one place in Judah that Babylon could not reach.

And in the same book, while the temple was still standing and about to fall, God promised something stranger than its rebuilding: a new covenant, not like the one written on stone. "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts" (Jer 31:33). The fire would move house, from the building to the bones.

This is what the people coming back to church most need, and what the Church most has to give them: not a safer building, but the fire. The same fire John promised at the Jordan. The one that fell at Pentecost on a room full of people who had locked the door because they had nowhere safe to go.

It is worth saying plainly what this does not mean. It does not mean the building does not matter, or that the sacraments are scaffolding to be kicked away once the flame has caught. The fire is lit in the font and fed at the altar, and nowhere else so reliably. The Church is not the idol. She is the hearth where the fire is kept. The idol is the Church used as something other than a hearth: as a bunker, a brand, a side, a hedge against loss. The temple was holy. Trusting in it was the sin.

## Quiz VI. Whose passover?

The unravelling is happening to the world. Is it also happening to the Church?

a. No. The Church is indefectible. Nothing can touch her.

b. Yes. Her buildings, her privileges, her standing, her numbers, and perhaps a great deal else.

c. Both, and this is the most important question in the quiz.

Commentary. The Church does not fail. "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt 16:18). But the Catechism says something the people looking for a safe institution rarely hear read aloud: "The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection" (CCC 677). The Church is indefectible the way Christ was indefectible: not by being spared death, but by going through it and coming out the other side.

So the person who comes back to the Church to be kept safe from the unravelling has walked into the one institution on earth that has promised, in writing, to go through it first.

And here is the turn the whole quiz has been leaning toward. If the Church herself passes over by dying, then the unravelling of the world is not only something to be survived. Received, it can become the very shape of our share in the paschal mystery. The Council said that the Holy Spirit offers every human being, in a way known only to God, "the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery" (*Gaudium et spes* 22). The collapse of what we trusted is one of the ways that offer arrives. You can bargain with it, float above it, wall it out. Or you can let it be your Good Friday, and wait at the tomb on the Saturday with nothing in your hands, and see what God does on the Sunday.

That is what (e) in the first quiz was asking for, without knowing the words. The fire does not keep you safe from the unravelling. It burns in you all the way through it.

## Quiz VII. What should you do on Monday?

You have read this far. The world is still coming apart. It is Monday morning. Check all that apply.

a. Build a house.

b. Plant a garden.

c. Marry, and have children.

d. Seek the peace of the city you are stuck in, and pray for it.

e. Buy a field.

Commentary. All of them. That is what Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon, the most hostile city they knew, with no prospect of going home for seventy years. Not: hide. Not: burn it down. “Build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters.” And then the hardest line in the letter: “seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the LORD for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace” (Jer 29:5–7). Pray for Babylon. Your peace is inside its peace.

And (e) is the strangest thing Jeremiah ever did. The Babylonian army was already camped around Jerusalem, the city was days from falling, and he was in prison, when his cousin came and offered to sell him a field at Anathoth, back home, in country the enemy already held. He bought it. He weighed out seventeen shekels of silver, signed the deed in front of witnesses, and had the papers sealed in an earthen jar so that they would keep, because God had told him: “Houses and fields and vineyards shall be possessed again in this land” (Jer 32:15). Real estate, during the siege. It is the most hopeful purchase in the Bible.

Percy ends his novel the same way, five years after the end of the world, which turns out not to have ended. Dr. More is poorer. He has married his nurse. They have a son. On Christmas Eve he goes to confession to the remnant priest, admits that he is still not very sorry for most of it, and is given a penance he can actually perform: ashes in his hair, a burlap sweater worn against the skin. Then he goes home in his sackcloth to his wife and cooks the dinner. That is the whole apocalypse. A man in the ruins, loving what is in front of him.

Jeremiah got less. When the city fell the Babylonians let him go, and the frightened remnant left behind came to ask him what God wanted of them. He told them: stay in the land; do not go down to Egypt. They called him a liar and took him to Egypt anyway, by force (Jer 42–43). An old tradition says his own people stoned him there. The man who bought the field at Anathoth never saw it possessed. The deed stayed in its jar.

That is the harder ending, and the truer one. The fire keeps burning in bones that get no Sunday in this life, and the purchase is still good. It is what waiting at the tomb on the Saturday looks like when the Saturday is a whole life long.

So let the idols fall, and do not run to prop them up. Grieve the world that is dying; it was beloved, and it is right to weep for it. Refuse the anaesthetic of false hope. Then go and tend what survives the fire: the truth, the covenant, the font, the altar, the neighbour, the soup, and a mercy that does not depend on anything holding. Plant the garden. Buy the field. Keep the fire.

## Answer key

There is none. That is the last joke of the self-help book that ends all self-help books. You cannot help yourself here. You can only be helped, and the help is not a building, or a system, or a side. It is a fire that was promised to the bones, and it is lit, of all places, in a church.

So go. But go for the fire.

## A note on sources

Scripture (King James Version): Jeremiah 6:14; 7:4, 11; 15:7; 20:9; 29:5–7; 31:33; 32:6–15; 42–43; Matthew 3:11–12; 16:18; John 12:24. The cistern is Jeremiah 38:6; the false prophet's two years, Jeremiah 28:3; the blinded king, Jeremiah 52:11; the seventy years, Jeremiah 29:10. The stoning in Egypt is a tradition, not Scripture; it is found in the *Lives of the Prophets*.

Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World* (1971), described, not quoted: Dr. Thomas More, the lapsometer, angelism and bestialism, the American Catholic Church and its Property Rights Sunday, the remnant priest, and the Christmas Eve confession. Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (1983), for the form.

Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* 48 and *Gaudium et spes* 22; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 677; Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* 93. Joseph Ratzinger, the 1969 talk collected in *Faith and the Future* (Ignatius Press, 2009), as quoted by the Catholic Education Resource Center; the essay calls it a radio talk, as it is commonly described.

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**SOURCES** *Lumen gentium*, *Evangelii gaudium* 93, Ratzinger, "The Church will become small", on *Love in the Ruins*, on *Lost in the Cosmos*.

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