

# Deliver Us from Evil

Digesting the Lord's Prayer

By **Treena Balds and Timothy Morton**

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*It is only the impossible that is possible for God. He has given over the possible to the mechanics of matter and the autonomy of his creatures. (Simone Weil)<sup>1</sup>*

*Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil (Luke 11:2–4)<sup>2</sup>*

The Lord's Prayer is a very, very familiar text. But it turns out that the original Greek says something very far from habitual readings of the prayer. This something is so far removed, and so radical, that common

(mis)understandings of the prayer begin to seem almost outrageous.

We focus here on one phrase only, which in English is, “deliver us from evil.” Exactly what is the “evil” from which the prayer asks God to deliver us? *Evil as such*, is the answer (Greek *to ponēron*, neuter; the precise Greek is *tou ponērou*, the genitive form, since the Greek “from” takes the genitive).<sup>3</sup> Not an evil being such as the Devil, “the evil one” (*ho ponēros*, masculine). Not evil as a state (*hē ponēria*, feminine), a stigmatizing stain that is somehow attached to our body or our soul (or both). Evil in the Lord’s Prayer is *phenomenological* evil, that is to say, evil not as a person or as a thing but rather as an “adjective” or “adverb.” “Deliver us from evil” is as radical as saying “deliver us from *green*,” or even “deliver us from *up*.”

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phenomenological evil, that is to say, evil  
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We place the terms “adjective” and “adverb” in quotation marks because they are meant not simply to convey a purely grammatical meaning, but rather a phenomenological one pertaining precisely to the logic of phenomena. This is the sense in which this essay will be using the term “phenomenology,” not as a substitute for “subjective experience of...” but as quite strictly, as we say, the logic of phenomena, the way appearances hang together.

The fact that this phenomenological sense of “evil” is staring us in the face in the original New Testament Greek should strike the reader as frankly shocking. At the very least, this is evidence of the way in which habitual usage of a word or phrase may not simply obscure its original sense. Habitually saying something over and over (hearing it in one’s head, visualizing others saying it, and so on, also counts) may drastically distort or even invert the meaning of a word or phrase. This syndrome amounts to a form of gaslighting, a disturbingly automatic form that requires no malicious motive on anyone’s part, just constant repetition without thought.

To be completely fair in making this argument, we do need to consider

whether English speakers have ever understood the meaning of the word “evil” in the phenomenological sense — as neither a subject nor an object, masculine nor feminine, but rather as a non- or neuter-nominal. “Evil” in English *could* be taken as an adjective recast as a noun — a nominalized adjective. However, one need not view it that way because the language also allows it simply to be an abstract noun. One way of removing the ambiguity is to define abstraction as precisely this nominalization of adjectival or adverbial properties — to claim that every abstract noun in English is a nominalization. If so, one might achieve their successful mapping onto the phenomenological sense. That situation would certainly be more palatable than the mere acceptance that English has no method of freeing (delivering!) its concepts from the valences of subject, object, and of gendered “noun-ness” (masculine, feminine, neuter).

After World War Two, Adolf Eichmann was prosecuted in Jerusalem for playing a part in organizing the Holocaust. Hannah Arendt strikingly describes the “Eichmann defense,” namely “I was just following orders,” as an instance of “the banality of evil.”<sup>4</sup> This phrase is very often misheard (talking of misinterpretation) to mean that Arendt holds evil to be banal. Far from it. What Arendt is pointing out is that banality as such might be a, or even the, form of evil as such. It would perhaps have been more instructive if she had inverted the phrase: “the evil of banality.”

*We have the evil with which banality can be exploited as well as the banality with which evil can persist.* 

We certainly recognize that the two phrases can coincide (intersect). Whereas “the banality of evil” can imply that all evil is banal when we can certainly have very active, passionate, and intentional evil, the version that reads “the evil of banality” certainly has its own overreaches in so far as it implies that all banality is evil. On the contrary, we can also have banal and routine benevolence. Thus, we have the evil with which banality can be exploited as well as the banality with which evil can persist. And perhaps this is our intersection. For maybe evil does seek out banality as that unthinking performance of routine actions which it can easily infect or hack, through

which it can easily spread, and via which it can easily become entrenched. An unexamined process might well still be worth performing, but the examined process is not worth exploiting. It would be interesting to explore how necessary a property banality is to (a) bureaucracy.

Since the phrase we are analyzing here explicitly asks God to “deliver” the speaker from evil as such, it is more than ironic (insofar as irony is normally understood, at any rate) that the constant banal repetition of the phrase has generated a drastic misunderstanding.

A misunderstanding, furthermore, that domesticates what Jesus is suggesting here in such a way as to cover over the adjectival or adverbial, phenomenological sense in which he means “evil” to be thought. This domestication serves the uncanny purpose of enacting another phenomenology altogether, one well described by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, that of the “beautiful soul,” who regards evil as an other, either as a person or as a state that can be eliminated or avoided, or at least as a phenomenon altogether different from the beautiful soul.

This, argues Hegel, is the very phenomenology of evil as such!<sup>5</sup> To paraphrase, what evil “feels like” is, in a sense, being the good guy, the “goodie” in a corny drama. Indeed, to be a fascist might well consist in being utterly sure that one is the goodie.

Whereas, in stark contrast, being genuinely good might feel like at the very least being the “baddie,” feeling contaminated, irreducibly stigmatized or otherwise saturated with “evil.” For Hegel, when the beautiful soul realizes that they are in fact the evil that they are projecting into the world, they grow a conscience and evaporate into the next phase of his phenomenology of spirit (called, indeed, “conscience”). Genuine religion consists in realizing that oneself is the evil one is seeing, “bad” people and behaviors notwithstanding. For evil might be an inescapable influence, which does not only emanate from people as evil deeds, is not just a bad thing that can happen. Rather, it might be a paradigm in which we live and exist — might indeed be the possibility condition for the way we exist. One might go further as Martin Heidegger did and realize that conscience as such was the very source and format of this “evil,” no matter what one does or thinks or says.<sup>6</sup> One is *formally guilty*, which is why one can feel guilty for specific things. And the only criterion for being formally guilty is that one is sentient.

*Genuine religion consists in realizing that oneself is the evil one is seeing.*



This is not to discount the existence of bad people or bad behaviors. At the very least, we acknowledge that bad behaviors cannot simply be dismissed as “notwithstanding” if conscience (or original sin?) is the format of evil. This formal guilt tells us not to go seeking evil’s removal or extirpation from ourselves and others. However, knowing that we cannot rid ourselves of evil leaves us only with the ability to take care not to do evil deeds. Not to do them ourselves. Not that we (according to Christianity) won’t have forgiveness if we do — we are, after all, born in sin and shapen in iniquity, so we are bound to act out of order sometime and therefore to need forgiveness. (By the way, *iniquity* might be a good word to examine in relation to evil in its middle voice.)

But somehow, we ought to try to minimize our negative impact on others. Christians do this not of ourselves: we are crucified with Christ and live, yet not us but Christ lives through us (Galatians 2:20). But conscience has, we hope, some kind of positive effect here on earth. Hopefully conscience urges us not to seek the “bad person” outside of the self, to look inward rather than outward for evil. Thus, conscience does make citizens of us all.

Minimal sentience describes an organism’s fundamental relation to its environment as constitutive of its relation to itself. Thus, placing its primitive receptors radially out into the environment and then inverting the image it receives, it creates an impression of itself. This process of being constantly briefed about what has already occurred seems a bit like *anagnorisis* — the notion of unforgetting or, more simply, “remembering that I forgot something.” The feeling of *deja vu* is probably the most abstract version of this sensation, so that what appears to be an anomaly, the curious sensation that one has already experienced something, might in fact be the default form of awareness as such. Whatever is the case, the “Did I leave the bike unlocked?” mode of remembering that we might have forgotten is default to sentience.

Why? Because sentience is always late! Sentience of anything always arrives a few hundred milliseconds after the thing in question. This even includes

intention as a “feeling” or “thought” — and we tend not to make a distinction between these two concepts because — as we have argued in the past — a feeling *is* a thought, but one from the future; it is a thought whose resonance one has grasped viscerally but whose import one has only not *yet* understood. Conscious will, then, might well be one of those late-arriving phenomena, such that when one intends to do something, *one has already started doing it.*

*Sentience of anything always arrives a few hundred milliseconds after the thing in question.*

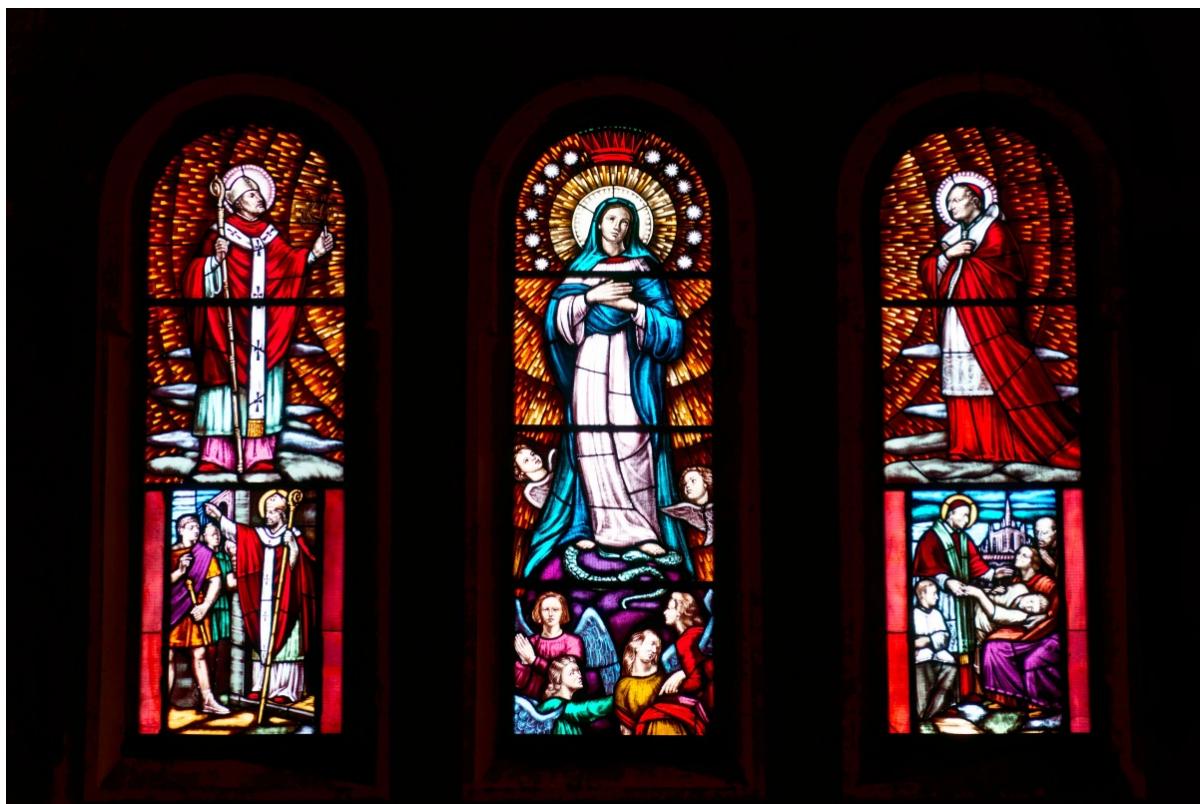


The scientific evidence for this possibility is substantial, but it also makes sense. Since the way a person can have the assurance that she will carry out an action is to have already begun doing it, intention might be just that recognition within oneself that one has already begun doing something.<sup>7</sup> Yet, its truth is not required for agreeing that sentience as such is always late, and so it risks also having the quality of “too late”: whatever it is “about” has by definition already taken place. Within the temporal gap between an event’s occurrence and our sense of it lies anxiety (angst). If conscience is consciousness of this lateness, this falling short or failing, then conscience might be the possibility condition for recognizing evil. This might, to some degree, explain Heidegger’s designation of conscience as the format of evil. It allows us to relate the phenomenological “atomic structure” of sentience to conscience, named as guilt or shame, as in Adam and Eve’s “We were naked, and we were ashamed.” Reading the “and” in this pronouncement to mean something sequential gives, “We realized we were naked, and this realization had the quality of shame.”

This is what is meant by “original sin,” which if our theory of sentience is to be believed, is not a punishment for eating the apple, but is rather a feature, not a bug, of being sentient or, if one prefers to restrict conscience to human or humanoid being, a feature of being human as such. The attempt to feel no guilt or shame, to abolish the conscience, for instance in the war against “woke” (a telling adjective indeed for our purposes!), would then be synonymous with evil. Only a psychopath feels little or no guilt or shame,

and perhaps even such a person feels these sorts of things, albeit in a displaced or alienated way. We guess that even psychopaths feel a minimum of guilt or shame, because sentience as such is made out of “conscience” as we have been arguing; and because accounts of psychopathic people often include stories of profound and disturbing feelings of alienation, an uneasy “something is wrong,” at least some of the time, as in a horror story when the protagonist wakes up with the murder weapon in their hands. (Several films by David Lynch explore this possibility.)<sup>8</sup>

Having said this, we are challenged by how to deal with the question of characterizing Adam and Eve’s former, conscience-free existence in Eden if not as sentience. The passage implies that there was a time when they didn’t know they were naked. We move through the following steps from sentience to conscience: *Did I forget something? Am I in danger? Did I leave myself open to harm? Did I cause someone else harm? Have I committed an infraction?*



We have lately been considering the reflexive nature of loving oneself (in response to Simone Weil’s assertion that God loves himself as a mechanism — or result — of his triune nature). Because self-love seemed unsavoury to Treena, she tried to think of another way that any urge to take care of oneself could be engendered. The principle of conation (is it?) defines the urge to stay alive, and that could be a non-reflexive explanation of such impulses as

nourishment seeking, pleasure seeking, pain avoidance and other actions that might be called self-love.

Then, applying that reflexivity to the act of recalling (that is, unforgetting) one's own actions as the mechanism of sentience... the gap between self and self becomes the failing that powers conscience? We could manage to equate sentience to consciousness, but equating it to conscience is where it gets tricky, because that might require self-consciousness as a bridge... Unless that time-gap that divides self from self is at least the fundamental unit of sentience, and that sentience — the awareness and response to the stimuli of one's surroundings — has a self-awareness corollary that one gets for free. So that sentience as a probe from the organism to the surroundings always returns a response that creates that organism's selfhood. Sentience provokes a self-awareness response. If we can call this scintilla of self-awareness a fundamental component of self-consciousness, then we have derived self-consciousness from consciousness. Conscience as a fundamental response to the gap of (self)consciousness could also come out in the wash.

*Likewise, being a good parent often consists in feeling like a terrible parent.* 

To return to the matter at hand, we do not require Hegel to argue that “being good” might consist in “feeling bad” at least some of the time.<sup>9</sup> It is, for instance, the mark of a *good* teacher to care enough about their pedagogical skills to worry that they might be a bad teacher. Likewise, being a good parent often consists in feeling like a terrible parent. Continuing along these lines, for a country to be truly “great,” then, that country would encourage its citizens not to suppress but rather to reckon with collective guilt, or at the very least collective responsibility for past wrongs, for instance the legacy of slavery in the case of the USA.

Responsibility only requires understanding. Consider noticing that someone has wandered into the street in front of a car. One doesn't have to prove that one caused this to happen to be responsible for getting the person out of the way of oncoming traffic. One only needs to *understand* what is happening. This seems to us to underscore the possibility that consciousness, which must be consciousness-of to function at all, might be “made out of”

conscience.

And now, coming back to the very beginning of this essay, we hope the reader can see how radical Jesus's request is. "Deliver us from evil" should sound utterly impossible by now. If sentience as such is formally "evil," the request is as absurd-sounding as asking to be made unconscious: how would one ever know that this had happened? Or even, asking God to remove our brain. More radically, it might even mean asking God to make us dead — a prospect not quite so sinister as it might seem in light of scriptural passages such as Romans 6:11, which encourages believers to consider themselves dead to sin but alive through Christ.

*Delivering ourselves from evil is formally impossible: it must only be something we can expect God to do.* 

But this apparent radicality is exactly why Jesus is enjoining us to pray like this. Delivering ourselves from evil is formally *impossible*: it must only be something we can expect God to do. As Simone Weil puts it, "It is only the impossible that is possible for God. He has given over the possible to the mechanics of matter and the autonomy of his creatures."<sup>10</sup> Human beings deal entirely in what is possible, such that they leave to God the things that are impossible. Asking God to do something that for us would be impossible is far, far from the transactional way in which this prayer is most often heard: "If I do this for you, say this prayer for example or do good stuff, please uphold your part of the bargain and do this favor for me." This is particularly true because the more popular the two versions found in Matthew makes the transaction explicit in a way that Luke's version — on which we focus — does not.

The request "deliver us from evil" comes at the end of a list of requests: "Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins" (Luke 11:4) or as the Book of Common Prayer puts it, "Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses..." These all too often have a transactional, "yadda yadda" feel to them. It seems as if all that needed to be done completely to deactivate the radicality of the Lord's Prayer was to require people to say it

over and over without thinking. The high-end version of this meaningless work is the Pascalian wager, similar to some injunctions of Vajrayana Buddhism. You don't believe or understand? Just adopt this posture, kneel down and pray, and it will come to you. Simone Weil was very wary of this unthinking work, just following a template. There is more than a hint of the master-slave dichotomy.<sup>11</sup> This must mean that the "If you don't say it, you won't be saved/go to heaven (and so on)" was never a feature of Jesus's suggestion that this is the way to pray to God. We argue further: that this *could not possibly have been a feature of Jesus's model prayer.*

We note here that the entire prayer could be "yadda yadda" indeed, but for a deeper reason: feeding the transactional back into itself. Each line plausibly take the form of a tautology:

"Our Father, who art in Heaven" — where else would He be?

"Hallowed be thy name" — tell us something we don't already know!

"Thy kingdom come" — knew that already; may my blue Mazda be a blue Mazda...

"Thy will be done" — when isn't it?

"On Earth as it is in Heaven" — same thing.

"Give us this day our daily bread": "Give us the things that are coming to us anyway"...

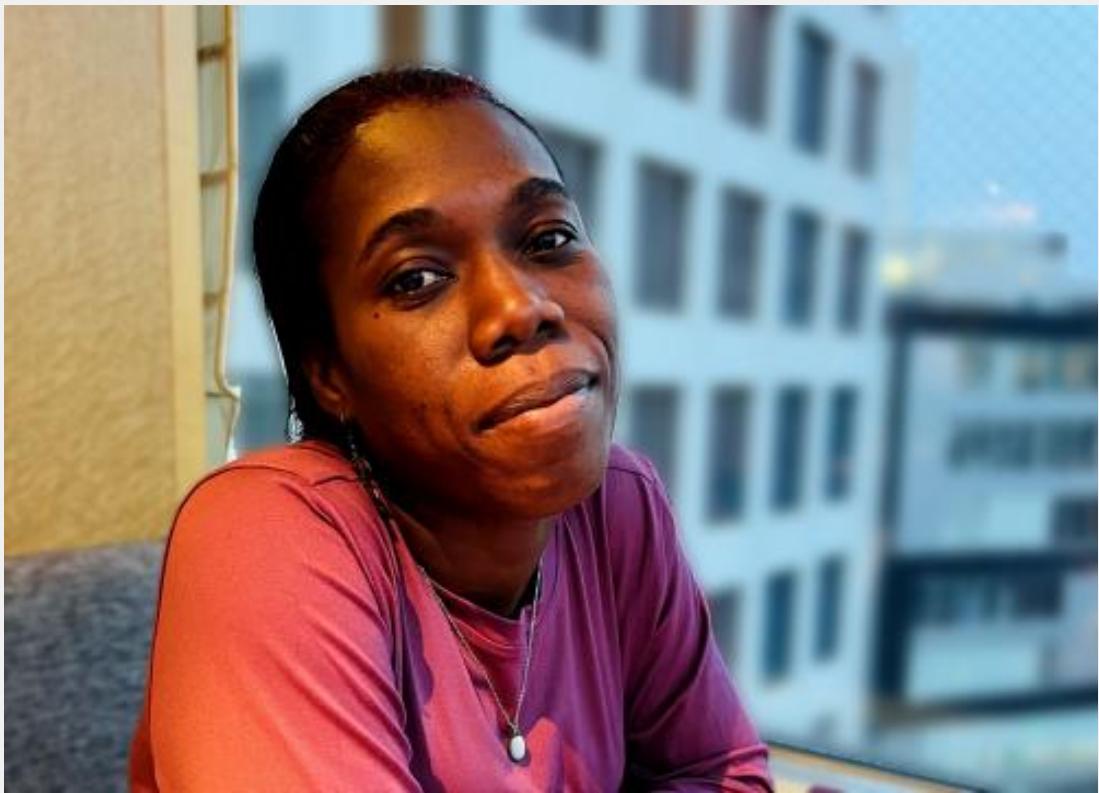
...and so on.<sup>12</sup>

What is extraordinary about spelling it all out like this, where every line is a parody of a "vanilla" prayer, asking someone to do something for one, is that it also sends up a quietist or (for example) Buddhist stance of "nonmediation": since Buddha nature is what it is, and cannot be altered, one just leaves it alone. Saying "God is God and I am me and that's it," however, fails to have the impact of the paradoxical beseechment that is the Lord's Prayer.

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**This is the first part of a two-part article. The second part is coming next week.**





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Find more of Treena's work at: <https://livetheology.substack.com>

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**Timothy Morton** is the author of 25 books translated 51 times into 20 languages, including *Hell* (Columbia, 2025) and *Hyperobjects* (Minnesota, 2013). He is the author of the libretto *Time, Time, Time* (opera by Jennifer Walshe, 2019), and of numerous artworks including *We Are the Asteroid* (with Justin Guariglia, 2019); *Come Fast from the Dark* (with Andrew Melchior, 2024); and *This Huge Sunlit Abyss From The Future Right There Next To You* (with Björk, 2015). In 2018 Morton co-wrote and appeared with Jeff Bridges in *Living in the Future's Past*, directed by Susan Kucera. Morton is Rita Shea Guffey Chair of English at Rice University.

Find more of Tim's work at: <https://livetheology.substack.com>

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## Notes

1. Simone Weil, “A War of Religions,” *Selected Essays, 1934–1943: Historical, Political, and Moral Writings*, ed. and tr. Richard Rees (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 211–18 (214). ↵
2. The King James version. ↵
3. We rely throughout this essay on Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, ed. Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1996). ↵
4. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006). ↵
5. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V Miller, analysis and foreword by J.N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 383–409. ↵

6. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 247–77 (249, 261–2, 265). ↵
  7. Daniel M. Wegner and Daniel Gilbert, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017). ↵
  8. Perhaps the most vivid is *Lost Highway* (October Films, 1997). ↵
  9. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 388–9. ↵
  10. Simone Weil, “A War of Religions,” 214. ↵
  11. Simone Weil, “The Mysticism of Work,” Gravity and Grace, tr. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, intro. Gustave Thibon (New York: Routledge, 2004), 178–80. ↵
  12. This is the version found in the Book of Common Prayer. ↵
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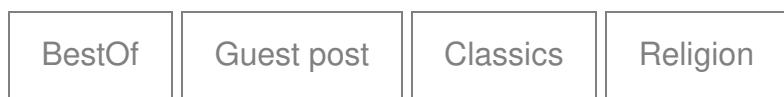
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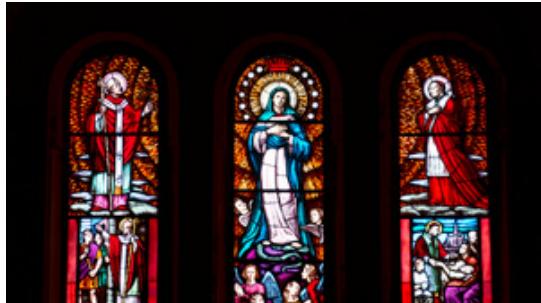




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