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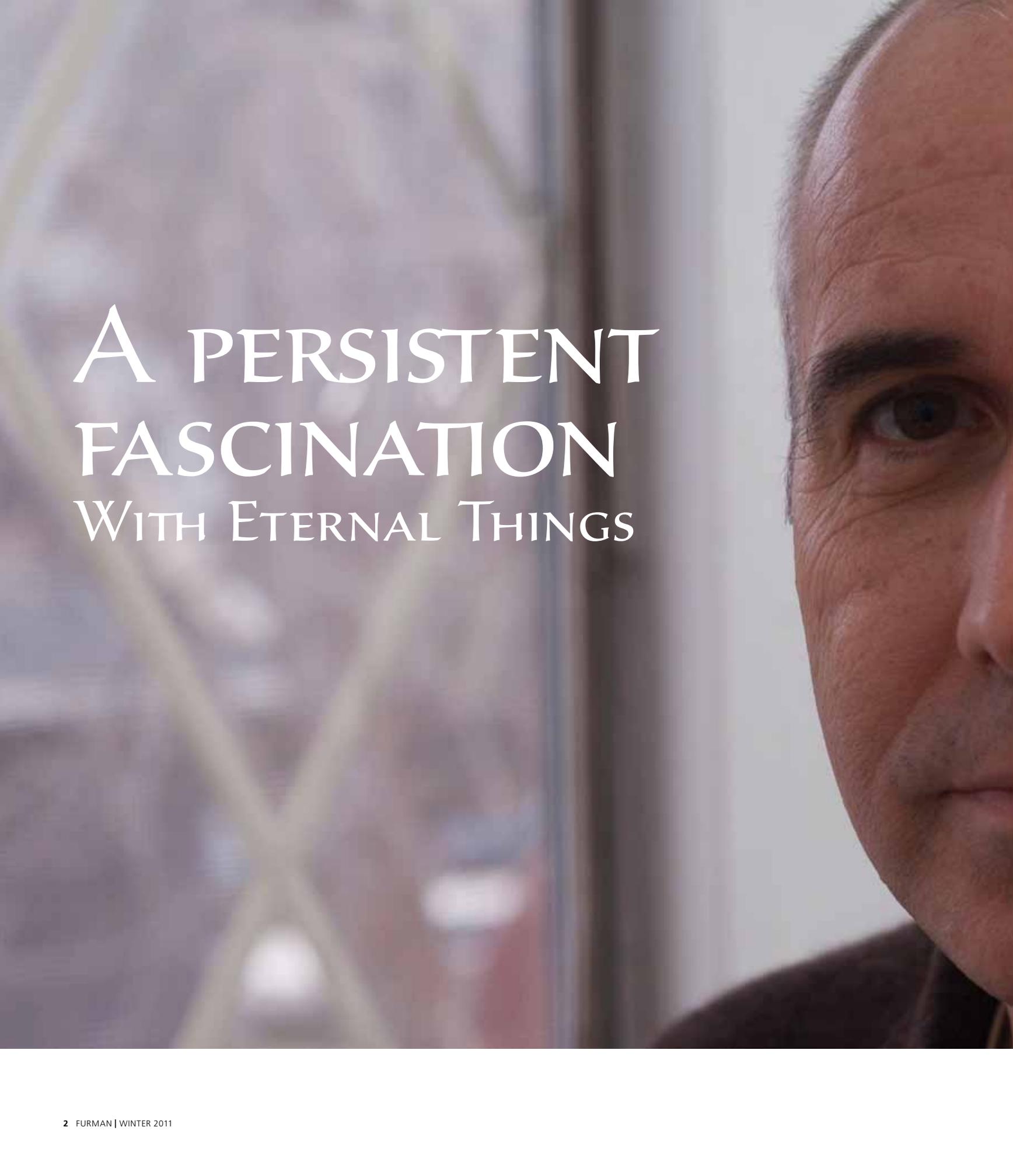
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A PERSISTENT
FASCINATION
WITH ETERNAL THINGS



BY KAREN GUTH

A CONVERSATION WITH AWARD-WINNING
WRITER DAVID GIBSON ABOUT LIFE
ON THE RELIGION BEAT, THE FUTURE
OF CATHOLICISM, AND THE IMPORTANCE
OF RELIGION JOURNALISM.

Life on the religion beat has taken PoliticsDaily.com reporter David Gibson to some remarkable places. He's traveled with Pope John Paul II, visited Castro's Cuba, interviewed Mother Teresa, and worked on film projects for CNN in the Middle East.

Not bad for a Plainfield, N.J., native who says he came to Furman in the late seventies "without really knowing what I wanted, where I would go, or how I would get there."

As it turns out, the story of how Gibson arrived is one not entirely of his own making. In fact, Gibson would make an ideal poster boy for Furman's Lilly Center for Vocational Reflection. He describes his work as a religion journalist, author and filmmaker as vocations that came about "by accident, or Providence, during a longer-than-expected sojourn in Rome in the 1980s."

But before Rome there was Furman. Gibson says he came to Furman largely for "prosaic reasons." He looked for a school that combined excellent academic credentials with reasonable cost, and Furman offered him a good financial aid package. Gibson jokes that he chose Furman because "Furman chose me," but one gets the sense that more than mundane practicalities were at work.

He describes Furman as "a close-knit community that was the perfect place for me. I was coming from a small, private, all-boys school (well, until my senior year when we went co-ed — too late to develop my social skills very well). Furman was an ideal bridge to a wider world that I wanted to explore. Having spent my life in the New Jersey suburbs, the South was exotic to me in many ways, something wholly different. At the same time it turned out to be the most congenial new home I could think of."

After graduating in 1981 with a major in history, Gibson spent a year on Capitol Hill as an intern and legislative aide, but left looking for more

excitement than Washington could offer. He painted houses — his “perennial fallback trade” — in New Jersey for a year before embarking on a backpacking trip to Europe. At the end of his trip, Italy called out for more. He decided to stay for a year in Rome, but “one year turned into five, as can happen in a place like Rome.”

While there Gibson found a gig teaching English, then landed a job as a sportswriter at *The International Courier*, an English language daily. He eventually went to work on an English language program at Vatican Radio, which he describes as “a cross between Catholic NPR and Armed Services Radio for the pope.”

Gibson may have chosen Rome, but shortly after he left, Rome chose him — in the form of a conversion to Catholicism in 1989. “Whether my conversion came because I was working at the Vatican or despite it, I am still working out,” he wrote in his first book, *The Coming Catholic Church: How the Faithful Are Shaping a New American Catholicism*.

Gibson’s other Rome-related conversion, to journalism, continued to find expression when he returned to New Jersey in 1990 to work as a religion reporter at *The Record* in Hackensack and *The Star-Ledger* in Newark. Then from 2003–09, Gibson was a freelance religion writer specializing in religion in the contemporary United States.

Discerning one’s vocation may be a spiritual endeavor, but if the list of publications that have featured Gibson’s work is any indication, following the call can have its worldly perks. His articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *New York, Fortune* and *Commonweal*, among others. In addition to his print work, Gibson started the “Pontifications” blog at Beliefnet.com, appears as a commentator on the PBS show “Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly,” blogs for *Commonweal*, and has co-written and co-produced two films for CNN.

He’s also the author of two books. *The Coming Catholic Church* (published in 2003) examines the clergy sexual abuse scandal. Arguing that the scandal and other issues such as women’s ordination are fundamentally about ecclesial authority, Gibson calls for reform of ecclesial power structures and a larger voice for laypeople. In *The Rule of Benedict: Pope Benedict XVI and His Battle with the Modern World* (2007), he takes a biographical look at the current pontiff, starting with the conclave of 2005 and an assessment of Pope John Paul II’s legacy.

All this, and we haven’t even gotten to his current day job. Since 2009, Gibson, who now lives in Brooklyn, N.Y., has been covering religion for PoliticsDaily.com, an on-line news service. His articles explore a wide range of topics, from news out of the Vatican and an examination of Reinhold Niebuhr’s influence on President Obama to reflections on the faith of Elizabeth Edwards. Gibson says he especially enjoys writing “analysis pieces that try to put developments in historical contexts, and to explain the theology and beliefs behind stories.”

And what he enjoys writing, others enjoy reading. In 2000, he won the Templeton Religion Reporter of the Year Award, the top honor for journalists covering religion in the secular press. This past November, for the second year in a row, Gibson won the American Academy of Religion’s highest award for opinion writing.

No doubt his commitment to excellence in religion journalism stems in part from his belief in the importance of religion not only in his life, but in the world. “Religion is so central to our national identity and our culture and our politics and our social lives together, and to the division in our society,” he says. “I can’t think of a topic that is more important to cover, and I wish the journalism industry had better resources for covering the beat, and a greater desire to cover it adequately.”

And for David Gibson, covering the religion beat has taken him to perhaps the most remarkable place of all — a place where, as theologian Fredrick Buechner describes it, “one’s deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

WHAT SPARKED YOUR INTEREST IN JOURNALISM AND IN RELIGION?

When I arrived in Rome I had no clear idea of what I was going to do. After teaching English for a few months, I showed up at *The International Courier*, bare résumé in hand, and got a job doing the sports section. That’s the beauty about living abroad — the talent pool for English speakers is so shallow anyone can stand out.

A year or so later, a friend mentioned that the English-language program at Vatican Radio needed someone. I protested that I was Protestant, knew little to nothing about Catholicism, and had no radio training. My friend said to just remember that bishops wear purple and cardinals wear red. When I was asked that question, I got it right and got the job. The radio was a forgiving place, and the Jesuits, who operate it for the Vatican, were very generous and protective of me.

My time in Rome honed my interest in religion. When I returned to New Jersey and began work as a journalist for *The Record*, the editors thought of me when any religion story came up. Apparently they figured that if I’d covered the pope I could write about the Dalai Lama or Southern Baptists. Little did they know. But it worked out well for me.

HAVING BEEN RAISED, AS YOU PUT IT, A “BILLY GRAHAM-STYLE EVANGELICAL IN MIDDLE-CLASS NEW JERSEY,” WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH?

The short answer is the Eucharist, which remains such a distinctive element of Catholicism and, sadly, a dividing line with many other Christians. But it was the universality of the church — which I was fortunate to witness firsthand — and the powerful tradition and teaching of social justice, the history and legacy of the church fathers, the church’s intellectual and artistic engagement and, above all, the patient, humane friendship of so many Catholics that led me to the Mass.

A man with short, graying hair is seated at a desk, looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. He is wearing a dark, long-sleeved button-down shirt. His hands are clasped together on the desk in front of him. On the desk to his left is a white ceramic mug with a colorful illustration of a crab and other aquatic life. A silver watch with a white face is visible on his left wrist. The background is a blurred office setting with a window and some papers on the desk.

That said, I find it interesting how much Catholicism has come to borrow from Evangelicals (and other Protestants) in recent decades, and conversely how much Evangelicals have come to embrace (or simply rediscover) traditionally “Catholic” elements like ritual prayer and devotions, the wisdom of the Church Fathers, and social justice teachings. Not that I’d consider a “reversion!” But the evangelicalism I grew up with seems much different than today’s evangelicalism.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR YOU TO DESCRIBE YOUR WORK AS A VOCATION?

I like the idea of vocation in all things. It conveys the idea that everything we do should be congruent with who we are and what we are here for. *Becoming Who You Are* is the title of a book by a Jesuit friend of mine. It reflects, I think, the necessity of discovering one’s true self and true passions not as some exercise in self-indulgence, but as a way of fulfilling a constructive role in the community and the world. This isn’t necessarily about some divine flash of light illuminating a path for us. God made us who we are, and it is a pilgrimage to discern that identity fully and to live it fully for others. It’s not easy, and we’re always growing — at least I hope I am — but it’s gratifying.

DO YOU SEE ANY PROGRESS ON REFORM OF THE PRIESTHOOD AND/OR THE PAPACY, WHICH YOU CALL FOR IN YOUR BOOK ON THE CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE SCANDAL?

I don't see much in the way of reform on a policymaking level, but change is happening, often dramatically, at the grass roots simply because the dynamics of Catholicism are changing. Vocations to the priesthood continue to fall, especially relative to the influx of Catholics. So you have an increasing number of "priest-less" parishes led by those in religious orders, laypeople, or deacons. You also have far fewer nuns, and laypeople are operating all sorts of ministries, and 80 percent of them are women. So the optics on the ground are changing, even as the authority structure is not.

WHAT CHANGES DO YOU SEE ON THE HORIZON FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH?

The current pope, Benedict XVI, is not about to promote any structural changes, but some future pope will have to face the challenges. If there is no Eucharist it's tough to see how there could be a thriving Catholic community. Moreover, the Catholic Church in the United States is increasingly Latino, and will be a majority Latino church in the near future. But unlike, say, the Irish, the clergy and hierarchy do not reflect that demographic, and the Catholic schools that were there for previous generations of immigrants are not there today. Will they remain Catholic, and if so, what kind of attachment will they have to the church?



WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO TRAVEL WITH JOHN PAUL II?

Traveling with John Paul, especially back in his heyday in the 1980s, was a unique experience, and really

fascinating to see up close. It was at turns entertaining, enlightening, and an education in the unexpected. For example, once weather forced the papal plane to land in Johannesburg in South Africa. This was during apartheid, and the pope was traveling to every country bordering South Africa but not there, because he did not want to appear to be giving his



approval to the regime. Well, God works in mysterious ways, and that episode, and the diplomacy needed to extract us all from it, was remarkable.

There were so many events and liturgies I covered that were truly moving, and they were often masses and encounters that were off the radar of most of the media, like a huge dust bowl outdoor mass in Bulawayo in Mugabe's Zimbabwe. Traveling with the pope really gave me a sense of the universality of the church, and the way this Polish pope could connect with people in Africa and Asia and Latin America, all so different from him and from each other, was beautiful. John Paul and Billy Graham had known each other since the pope was a cardinal in Poland, and they had much in common.

But it was often the daily audiences and meetings at the Vatican that I got to see up close that struck me, and the many groups the pope had to meet with, like the Harlem Globetrotters. Here was this white-clad pontiff, smiling and dutifully posing for a picture with these guys towering over him. His aide explained that these were the Harlem Globetrotters. What was this Polish churchman supposed to say? He smiled and said in his Boris Karloff-sounding English, "Yes, I have been to Harlem!" And he had.

Then there was Mother Teresa browbeating John Paul into opening a center inside the Vatican walls for the poor and homeless. She pestered him every time she was in Rome. That's how she was.

Everyone comes to Rome, and everyone tries to see the pope. And we journalistic hangers-on get a front-row seat.

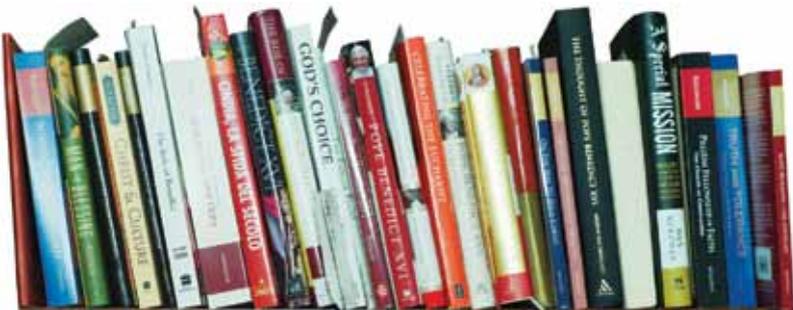
WHAT LONG-TERM RAMIFICATIONS DO YOU THINK POPE BENEDICT XVI'S EMPHASIS ON WHAT YOU CHARACTERIZE AS THE "BEAUTY OF FAITH" AND INDIVIDUAL PIETY AND CHARITY OVER SOCIAL JUSTICE HAS FOR CATHOLICISM'S STRONG TRADITION OF SOCIAL TEACHING?

That approach is still the focus for this most "Christo-centric" of popes, though his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* ("Charity in Truth") was a powerful exposition and endorsement of traditional Catholic social justice teaching as applied to today's globalized economy. But Benedict is still a "small-is-beautiful" conservative who will always stress personal conversion as the way to societal justice. Moreover, many of his allies in the hierarchy and among lay leaders are more ideologically conservative. They work to keep the focus on issues of piety and personal morality — like sexual behavior — rather than the pope's social justice statements.

DOES YOUR STATUS AS A CONVERT TO CATHOLICISM SHAPE THE WAY YOU DEAL WITH TOPICS RELATED TO CATHOLICISM?

I think people assume that having a Catholic cover Catholic topics is somehow a conflict of interest, and that you may give better treatment to subjects who share your religion. On the contrary, I think there is a tendency — which you have to resist — to be more critical of one's own denomination than of other faiths. It's sort of the way we can criticize our own families or tribe in a way "outsiders" cannot.

The other peril is that a reporter who is Catholic or Jewish or Buddhist or whatever can assume they know everything they need to know about a topic related to their own faith because they practice that faith. Of course you don't, and as soon as you make such assumptions, you usually make mistakes. When I cover other faiths I think I am especially diligent about asking questions and getting the story right because I assume I don't know anything. That allows me — often, I hope — to write with more confidence and authority.



WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH IN YOUR WORK?

I guess the old line from the 19th century Chicago writer Finley Peter Dunne is my motto: "Comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable." It almost has a biblical echo to it. But really, we must strive to be fair and always factual in seeking the truth, which is what journalism is about, at heart.

Truth can also be conveyed in stories, not just exposés or investigations, and so storytelling is also a very important talent to develop and the kind of thing media must continue to make space for. Stories can convey the nuances and gray areas of truth and reality, which are often presented as black and white. I get great satisfaction from telling a story. I have also helped expose bad guys for who they are, which is a kind of grim satisfaction. But on the religion beat the real reward is learning something new and explaining it to others.

WHAT ROLE, IF ANY, DID YOUR EXPERIENCE AT FURMAN PLAY IN SHAPING YOUR CAREER?

I am a great fan of a liberal arts education, the kind of broad-based curriculum that I fear is falling out of favor as young people understandably try to focus in on a career and direct their study to that one goal. Such focus is admirable and necessary at times, but it is a shame if it prevents a college-age person from exploring all the possibilities around them. The humanities may not be a career path for everyone, but studying philosophy and art and literature and history and the like can help you enjoy and understand the journey ahead. In that sense, Furman was wonderful for me. The faculty — in particular my advisor in the history department, John Block — were very supportive and encouraging.

TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOUR CURRENT AND UPCOMING PROJECTS.

I would very much like to write a book about conversion — not my own so much as current ideas of conversion and how they compare to traditional notions. But that may have to mature a bit. In the meantime I may write something about religion and politics today. I am also working on a two-hour History Channel program on the Vatican that has some remarkable insider footage. It should air around Easter.

But my day job keeps me so busy, thanks to the virtues and vices of religious folk and the persistence of our fascination with eternal things, that it's hard to find time for much else. That's just as well. I should go on retreat! |F|

Visit www.PoliticsDaily.com to read David Gibson's columns and commentaries. Karen Guth is a 2001 graduate who recently completed a Ph.D. in religious ethics at the University of Virginia. Photos by Stephen Kozlowski, including the items on these two pages that are displayed in Gibson's home.

