

FR. GLENN SUDANO, CFR

We Live in a Castle

*Stories, allegories, and commentaries about
the most wonderful religion in the world.*



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About the Book

“Blue collar ecclesiology” or “kitchen table catechesis” is how the Father Glenn Sudano, CFR describes his way of presenting some interesting ideas about what is considered by many to be a little known yet fascinating subject. *We Live in a Castle* is Father’s first book. The title is taken from one of its twelve stories, each of which, like an array of spotlights, illumines its subject from different angles.

The subject of the book? The Church—its nature, history and mission. Father describes his work as “friendly yet provocative.”

He challenges the reader to dig into the Church’s history and discover a valuable treasure which he calls “the most wonderful religion in the world.” He uses modern day parables, some based his real life experience, each with an introduction and spiritual reflection.

We Live in a Castle is well suited for teachers and young students participating in religious education. It will be especially useful for adults who are considering or preparing to enter into full communion with the Catholic Church (RCIA).

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Chapter XI: We Live in a Castle

Like many fairy tales, the following story is simple and has a happy ending. Too bad many of the stories that make up our lives cannot be the same. The image of the castle works quite well as a stand-in for the Church as both share many of the same characteristics—big, old, drafty, and chock full of mystery and intrigue.

No doubt many of our readers have family members and friends who have left the castle. Often enough the reason given is the Church is too institutional and impersonal. In the last fifty years “mainline” Protestant churches, together with the Catholic and Orthodox have experienced what could be called an “ecclesial exodus”. Curiously, what we are witnessing in Africa and Asia is the opposite—ecclesial expansion! At the same time, small homegrown churches—evangelical, non-denominational, or Pentecostal—are growing like mushrooms. The question is not how fast they are growing but how long will they last? Like cabins that come in a build-it-yourself kit, they are quickly constructed when it’s sunny, but easily dismantled in a storm.

As with our other stories, We Live in a Castle appears to be critical of anyone who has left the Church. However it is my desire to make us think about how we have treated our spiritual castle. While castles are classic, or as the kids would say, “cool”, the Church itself should not be stone cold.

Do take note of the grandparents in this story. They represent the many people of generations past who, while lacking material things, were greatly enriched by their devotion to the Church. I believe the generation now heading home to heaven had an understanding and appreciation of the transcendent which eludes many today. I pray that by God’s grace, a generation will emerge in our own time that will not consider or critique the poor condition of the castle, but work diligently to make it warm and beautiful once again.

Although now middle aged, Joey and Johnny still call each other by their childhood names. Like all brothers, they are different in some ways and very alike in others. As children they spent countless hours together playing games and having adventures outdoors. But if you asked them, both would agree that their best adventures actually took place indoors. You see, Joey and Johnny grew up in a castle. Well, it wasn't really a castle with a deep moat and wooden drawbridge; actually, it was a very big mansion. Both boys were raised there, as were their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. Built atop a large hill, the grand house overlooked acre upon acre of rolling, expansive farmland. Even the people in town referred to their home as "the castle". In giving directions, they would say, "...then to your left, look up, and you'll see a big castle on the hill."

The boys had a supremely happy childhood. Their indoor adventures involved hour upon hour of imaginative play. In such a big house there was always something new nook to discover or cranny to play in. While both boys shared the same desire to discover new things, Johnny had a preference for exploring the dark and musty maze of rooms in the stone-walled basement, while Joey liked to poke around the cavernous attic filled with dusty furniture and antiques. One activity they both enjoyed was looking at the family portraits on display throughout the house. Making up funny names and voices for the ancient ancestors in the pictures always left them howling; in fact, the more somber the face on the portrait, the louder their laughter.

The boys loved their grandparents and often recalled how happy they were when they were boys and Grandma and Grandpa were still living. Their grandparents knew the mansion inside and out. Grandma was particularly proud of the house and spent much of her time sweeping, mopping, and dusting. The brothers remember her dusting the old portraits which she called "our very own Hall of Fame". As an adult Joey would say with a smile, "Grandma not only knew their names, she also knew their phone numbers!" Without a doubt, their grandmother was a treasure trove of information about the mansion and those who lived there. She not only spoke about a hall of fame, but also about a "Hall of Shame". Yes, she knew the house was home to the famous and the infamous, the very best and the very worst.

In her desire to instill an interest in and appreciation of the mansion, On Sundays Grandma would bring the boys to the library, a large sunny room whose walls were lined with books. Hidden behind one wall was a walk-in safe where very rare and valuable books were stored. There was even a special section that held parchment scrolls! Johnny always found this secret room fascinating, but it gave Joey the creeps. Grandma would pick out a book, sometimes even one of

the rare volumes, and read it to the boys. Sitting on a long mahogany and leather couch with a grandson on each side of her, she would read to them about the exploits of those who had lived in the mansion long before the present inhabitants. When the boys were little, they enjoyed these Sunday story sessions, but as they got older they gradually lost interest.

Being home schooled, the boys looked forward to Fridays when they would put away their books and pick up their flashlights. After dinner and dishes, Grandma would announce that it was “time travel” night. She would take the boys to the basement to examine the ornate mosaic floors and sturdy stone walls covered with faded drawings. There Grandma would do her best to pique the boys’ interest, telling them of the age and importance of what was to be learned in the basement. Like the safe room in the library, Joey always saw the basement as creepy. However Johnny had a natural interest in history and he always listened in rapt attention during Grandma’s lessons.

Then there was Grandpa.

Grandpa too took pride in the mansion, although he didn’t talk much about it. He would say, “Grandma’s the historian, and I’m the handyman”. Truthfully, he was more than a handyman; he knew every inch of the mansion and was constantly inspecting, repairing, repainting or replacing some part of it. Often the boys saw him on ladders inside and out pulling something down or putting something up. Their father however clearly lacked Grandpa’s skill. Yet he did his best to do his part, holding ladders steady or opening cans of paint. No doubt, Grandpa grew up in a different world with different values. Back then, living in the mansion was considered a privilege not a burden. Apparently, the pride, sacrifice and fidelity which characterized the lives of the grandparents did not get passed down to the father and his two boys.

As one would almost expect, both grandparents died within weeks of one another. Their loss was tough for the boys. Certainly, nothing was the same; there was a palpable emptiness in the house. In fact, it soon didn’t even look the same; the picture frames became dull with dust and broken things were left unrepaired. The house benefited from Christmas and other festive occasions as these were preceded by days of pushing brooms and polishing furniture. On those occasions aunts and uncles and cousins would filled the main dining room while all the little ones would be running around the house playing hide-and-seek. Often enough, one of them would point to an old portrait and ask; “Uncle Joey, who’s *that*?” Joey would tilt and scratch his head and give the same reply: “Gee, I forget. Go ask Uncle Johnny”.

As the years went on, Mom and Dad also began to slow down. Maintaining the mansion gradually became a burden, mainly shouldered by the boys. Joey complained: “This place is way too big for us. It’s time to downsize! Maybe we should move.” Johnny always rejected the idea; Joey would retort, “Listen, if you want to live in a museum, that’s your business, but that’s not for me.” Joey knew his aging parents could never move from the house while Johnny never would. He thought to himself, “They’re too old, and he’s too attached.” And it was during the winter months when he would once again present his case. Outside the kitchen, which was warmed by the large old-fashioned oven, the house was chilly. The many fireplaces remained empty as heat meant work and lots of it. Logs had to be hauled in and properly cut, split and stacked. What Grandpa could do in a day now took them weeks even with all hands on deck.

Well one year, winter slowly crept in like a gentle lamb, but in no time became a lumbering polar bear. Despite the plentiful trees on the property, the lack of heat in the house was felt by all, especially Joey.

“If grandpa was here he’d get these babies burning real quick”, Joey said to himself as he crumpled newspaper into tight balls and tossed them into the hearth. Although nothing was said, the brothers clearly remembered their grandfather attempting to teach them. “Boys, he would say, I won’t be here forever; watch what I do and learn so you can do it for yourselves when I’m gone.” But being boys, playing always trumped learning. Now, years later, neither could remember how Grandpa’s fired up the hearths. Joey, in particular, lacked both the patience and perseverance necessary to get the job done. Johnny would often hear his brother, stomping through ice-cold hallways shouting “Why didn’t someone teach us how these things worked?” Although Johnny remained silent, both knew Grandpa did teach them or, better put, attempted to teach them.

One gray, icy afternoon, when Johnny was kneeling and leaning into a massive stone hearth trying to coax flames from some pieces of oak, the door to the room flung open. He turned to see his brother raising his arms as if making an announcement. “I’m outta this place!” Johnny, dismissing his ranting, simply stared at a smoldering log and flatly remarked, “I think this wood is wet.”

Joey walked over to his brother and pulled at his arm saying, “Come with me”. Johnny could barely keep up with his brother as he exited the room, hustled down the long hallway, scrambled down one set of stairs and then up another. The obstacle course ended at the end of a long hallway and a large window. Joey peered out a frosted pane, and turning to his brother said,

“Take a look at my new home!” Johnny looked out the window, turned to Joey and said, “You mean that...*cabin*?”

In the distance on a slight knoll stood a small log cabin surrounded by a simple wooden post fence. The house was evidently occupied as every window glowed with soft amber light. Moving shadows gave evidence of a house full of people and activity. Joey leaned over and opened the window. Pulling Johnny to it he said “Listen!” While the cabin stood quite a distance from their house, one could easily hear music and singing. With the cloudless blue sky and the frosted fields, the little house appeared picture perfect on the horizon. Despite the icy breeze numbing their faces, both boys remained still, staring and listening. Joey then placed one hand on Johnny’s shoulder and with the other pointed: “See that smoke billowing from the chimney? Well where’s there’s smoke, there’s fire, and where’s there’s fire, there’s warmth. Closing the window, he added, Bro, you may think this is a mansion, but I say it’s a mausoleum! Let’s get to the cabin before we both freeze to death.”

That evening, before retiring, Joey was on the edge of his bed sitting on his hands to keep them warm. He could see his breath as he exhaled into the cold air. He was now sure of his decision: He would leave the mansion for a better life—and a warmer one.

At nine the next day, Joey appeared in the kitchen dressed for a blizzard. When he saw his brother’s get-up, Johnny laughed out loud and asked, “Where’s your dogsled?” Joey, ignoring the comment and adjusting his scarf, said flatly, “Well, I’m goin’”. Before Johnny knew it, Joey was heading towards the door saying, “I’ll be back to visit”. This he did—rarely—until their parents passed away. After that he was missing in action.

Joey’s departure was difficult in many ways; emotionally for sure, but also practically. Johnny stepped into Grandpa’s shoes taking up the maintenance of both house and property. While work occupied most of every day, evenings were spent reading in the library. Often enough Johnny could be found with pen and pad in hand taking copious notes on the various portraits and searching out secret things to be found in the basement or attic. The library proved to be an invaluable resource on the history of the mansion. Studying drawings and old photos it was evident that the mansion’s interior décor had changed over the centuries. However, as the walls were set in stone, the basic structure of the building had remained the same. While Johnny deeply missed his brother, his one consolation was that Joey was happy—especially during winter.

The day was blistering hot. It was July, and Johnny was sitting in the cool kitchen enjoying a frosty glass of lemonade. Suddenly, the back doorknob began to rattle. He was shaken knowing

that few people other than family members would ever use the back door. His heart began to pound as it sounded like someone was attempting to break into the house. He set his glass on the table and quickly ran to a side window. As he parted the curtain he jumped at the “BANG” of the wrought iron knocker. Looking this way and that, he stopped and cried out, “Oh my Gosh!” Running to the wooden door, he pulled it open, and found himself standing eye to eye with Joey. “C-can I come in?” he stammered.

Grabbing his brother’s sleeve, Johnny pulled him over the threshold with a huge smile and shouted “Get in here! It’s like an oven out there!”

The door had hardly closed before Joey began to ramble: “Johnny, listen; I’m sorry I left. I was so cold and frustrated...” His brother cut him off: “Let me get you something cold to drink.” While Johnny went for some lemonade, Joey walked over to the table and stroked its surface with his fingertips. The old oak table held so many memories—wonderful memories. He turned towards the iron stove and could almost see Grandma standing there stirring the soup. Carrying two clinking glasses of lemonade, Johnny said “You see? I moved the table. I’ve made a few changes, but with a house like this it’s more restoration than renovation.” Joey reached out for a glass and said “Wow, this place feels air conditioned; my house is like an oven!” Johnny replied, “Big stone houses don’t need air conditioning.” Joey nodded, smiled sheepishly, and quietly sipped while taking note of his brother’s pointed observation.

In silence Johnny watched his brother empty his glass in a couple of gulps. “The lemons are from the orchard and the mint is from the garden,” Johnny said as he got up and headed to the fridge for refills. Before enjoying a second round, the brothers smiled and tapped their glasses. Without a word they sat at the table sipping their drinks and taking note of each other’s tiny wrinkles and graying hair. Joey made little effort to hide his happiness at being in the old house. “Amazing!” he said. “I can almost smell Grandma’s homemade bread!” Johnny replied with smile, “I have her recipe; I bake a big loaf and enjoy it all week. I also perfected Grandpa’s wine”. Then with a chuckle added, “but *that* I enjoy only on Sundays!”

Joey felt ready to talk about what he really came for. “Listen, Johnny, the cabin was really great when I first moved in. I met and made some really good friends...beautiful and generous people. The cabin was a real relief and was definitely warm and cozy. Small houses have their advantages—but also disadvantages. In a small house everything becomes big, even opinions. I must admit, after awhile I got tired of some people’s preoccupation with the mansion. One would say, “I used to live in one of those things; they’re so old and cold.” Another would complain,

“Places like that are so impersonal.” “At first I listened, and I even agreed. But then it started to get personal. In the end they were talking about Grandma and Grandpa, Mom and Dad—and even you! After some time, I got fed up and found another house—slightly bigger. Again, great people, but living in a small world. I began to think about the mansion and the family and the wonderful things we used to have. Then, one morning, I woke up and it all was clear as a bell: ‘I have to get back home!’”.

After some silence Johnny spoke up: “You know, after you left, I was upset, but I understood. Joey, it was cold and neither of us knew how to keep the place warm. Besides, I thought you being away might be good...you know...maybe work off some anger. Well, I was angry too, but it motivated me to learn how to maintain the fireplaces. I found a whole pile of Grandpa’s books...” Joey cut him off, pointing at him with an excited laugh: “I know, I know! Every winter I noticed there were more and more chimneys smoking like nobody’s business!” Johnny continued: “Yeah, I spent a whole lot of time reading, not only about fireplaces but people who lived in the mansion. Joey, are you ready for this? I think I’ve read every book in the library!” Then leaning back with an air of satisfaction he added, “Between you and me, I may know more about the house and its history than Grandma and Grandpa together!”

Johnny noticed his brother’s eyes brimming.

The silence they shared was almost sweet. Something very good was happening as they sat at the table. Joey broke the quiet and said, “Hey, I have a great idea! What if I go over and invite some of my friends from the cabin to come over for a tour of the mansion? I mean today they must be roasting...they would love to get out of the heat! They talk so much about the place, why shouldn’t they see it? Johnny pulled back a bit and replied, “Joey, I don’t think that’s a good idea. They’re probably afraid of the place.” then he added with a slight smile, “Especially if they see some of those portraits! They’d scare anyone!”

His brother chuckled and retorted, “No, no, you’re wrong. Believe me, when they step inside and see how spacious it is—and feel how cool it is—they’ll want to stay and see the whole place! Believe me, in this heat, they won’t be too quick to leave! They’ll be fascinated by the attic and the cellars; the cabin doesn’t have either!

Suddenly Joey was silent. Johnny asked, “What’s wrong?” Joey looked uncertain: “Well...I’m thinking. My friends who live in the cottage...what if after their visit some may want to come back...I mean... to stay? What’ll we do then?” With that Johnny suddenly brought his glass down on the table with bang. He stood up, and shouted “Let’s get crackin’!” Johnny bolted

from the table and ran across the kitchen to the broom closet. Pulling out a box full of rags and grabbing a bottle of polish, he said “You take care of the furniture and I’ll dust and mop the floors. All the portrait frames are already dusted and polished—it took me a week! But the library can use some work!”

As his brother stood by the closet rifling through a cardboard box filled with rags, Joey sat at the table. He slowly buried his face in his hands and gave out a muffled cry. Johnny stopped and shot a look across the kitchen. His brother was bawling, his shoulders shaking and his hands attempting to cover his tear soaked face. His muffled voice became high pitched like that of a child. “Grandma, I’m sorry!...Grandpa , I’m sorry!” Running to the table, Johnny quickly picked up a chair and gently set it beside his brother. He said nothing knowing that the silence and sobbing were part of the healing. As Joey slowly shook his head and wept, Johnny simply held his shoulders and kept repeating, “It’s all good, Joey...It’s all good...”

In ten minutes the storm had passed and Joey sat silent with reddened eyes. With anxiety written across his face, he raised his concern once again, “Johnny, you don’t understand, what if they *all* want to come. What if they *all want to stay*? What if they *all want to stay*?”

Johnny sat in silence. How grateful he was that his brother had come home. He had thought the pain of his leaving would never leave his heart. Turning to face his brother he said tenderly, “Joey, listen to me. When you and I were kids Grandma told us this house was a home for many people. She reminded us it was a privilege to be a part of its history. Grandpa once told me that our house was home to both royalty and those who dressed in rags. So, everyone is invited. But now we have to work; we must make everything here clean and beautiful. And when winter comes they’ll stay, not because they’ll feel warm, but because they’ll feel at home. Remember Joey, we don’t just don’t live in a house, we live in a castle – a wonderful castle!

And taking his brother’s face between his hands, he looked into his tear filled eyes and repeated these words with his own eyes all aglow: JOEY, NEVER FORGET!
WE...LIVE...IN...A...CASTLE!”

AS I SEE IT

What would you do if you were informed that you had inherited a castle? No doubt, you would certainly not keep this extraordinary news a secret. In fact, going to visit your very own castle would make its way right to the top of your bucket list. Yet, the thought of owning a castle somehow just isn’t enough; could you imagine living in one? That would be a dream—which just might turn into a nightmare.

As I imagine receiving such an inheritance, I picture my castle being atop a large scenic hill somewhere in Europe. Arriving, I don't find the castle in pristine condition. After all, castles are always old, big and most often, abandoned. Castles come in three different sizes: immense, massive, and colossal. As the castle is huge, the amount of work—pulling down cobwebs and sweeping expansive stone floors—would also be huge. Patience would no doubt be necessary as ornate iron chandeliers aren't easily dusted and ancient wall tapestries don't do well with dry cleaners. So, unless I have a small army of volunteers or plenty of people on the payroll, I'll have my work cut out for me.

The image of a castle is a wonderful and workable symbol for the Church. In both cases, we are considering something quite old—indeed, two thousand years and counting—not simply antique but ancient. Like any castle the Church stays put as years and people come and go. And, as with castles, change affects only movable objects like furnishings. Immovable objects—well, they don't move: you may decide to put down a new rug, but the stone floor stays. And, you don't need to be a professional contractor to know that it is unwise to move weight-bearing walls. In your excitement to get some extra space, you just might find yourself buried under debris.

While Jesus is known to be a carpenter, strictly speaking he was more of a contractor. And while he didn't work on any castles, he did more than simply repair wooden chairs. He, of all people, would know the value of building on bedrock. In fact, one of His many parables speaks about the necessity of building a house on stone rather than sand. And recall that He gave Simon a new name—Peter, that is, “the Rock”. While on the surface, Peter might appear rough and impetuous, Jesus saw into the raw-boned Fisherman's core and saw something solid to build on.

Despite formidable powers arrayed against it, both human and demonic, by God's design the castle still stands because it is firmly built on apostolic foundations laid down so many centuries ago. Yet even with its formidable size and strength, maintenance is always necessary as even stone walls need occasional upkeep. Along with the need for ongoing work, we have to consider the people who inhabit the castle: To put it bluntly, where there are people, there are problems. The Church is no exception. In fact, one good reading of the New Testament will convince even the optimist that if one wants a Church without problems, they should find one without people. If I may be so irreverent as to misquote Our Lord: “Where two or more are gathered in my name—there'll be problems!”

In this story, we meet two brothers who as children enjoyed playing in their family's castle; yet as adults, when the beloved home came into their care, they neglected to keep it up. We

saw how the history of the castle wasn't fully appreciated by their parents, and less so by their children. Don't we see this today as time honored religious values and practices are quietly set aside by many who care little because they understand even less? Inheriting a castle is exciting, but not for those who see only work rather than something wonderful.

To all of our readers who have left the castle because it is too big, too old or too cold: Perhaps you may want to reconsider and come back home. As the story makes quite clear, the real problem was not the big building but the inept brothers in charge of it. Cobwebbed corners, dirty windows, moldy basements, and unkempt halls—these say nothing about the home builder but much about the homeowner!

For myself, I'm like Johnny. I could never leave my inheritance. And believe me, I know the castle can be drafty and, at times, creepy. Just the same, it's been in my family for centuries. Call me crazy, but I feel secure behind its walls. I know I will never see the day when every square inch is spic and span. Nevertheless, I'm committed to cleaning up every corner I can. I'm also committed to do my part—even in the dead of winter—to make this big old castle feel like a warm, cozy cottage.

Been away? Come back, my brother. As they say, "my castle is your castle".

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