

## THE INTERVIEW

# John Dominic Crossan

An expert on the historical Jesus shares what we get wrong about the resurrection

**J**OHN Dominic Crossan is widely regarded as one of the foremost historical Jesus scholars of our time. He was an influential member of the Jesus Seminar, a group founded to examine the historicity of the deeds and sayings of Jesus and to report the results of its research to the general public. Crossan's new book is *Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Vision*. Crossan spoke with Alicia von Stamwitz.

**ALICIA VON STAMWITZ:** Why did you start researching the resurrection?

**JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN:** From the year 2000 on, I was helping lead people around Turkey to study Paul. But in the process of going through churches in places like Cappadocia and Istanbul each year, [my wife, Sarah, and I] began to notice these weird images of the resurrection. Remember that the actual event of the resurrection is not described anywhere in the New Testament. Artists had to figure out how to portray the resurrection without any text to guide them.

In the West, we have Jesus coming out of the tomb, alone, looking a bit like an athlete coming out well buffed from the gym. But in the East,

you have Jesus holding the hand of Adam and Eve and leading them out of Hades. We could see it everywhere we went in Turkey, and we were curious. We started visiting churches in Egypt, Russia and Romania and realized that this is the normal resurrection image for all of Eastern Christianity.

**AVS:** What did the two portrayals tell you?

**JDC:** The Eastern churches have a universal vision of Jesus arising with all of humanity, symbolized by Adam and Eve. Western Christianity has a more individualistic vision of Jesus, arising glorious and triumphant but also solitary and alone.

In the Eastern vision, all of humanity is inside the story. I'm participating in the story. It's not outside of me; it's not like somebody is doing it for me. We in the West have far too much substitution. We think it's going to be done for us or already has been done for us. And that gives us nothing to do. You just have to believe enough weird stuff to get to heaven.

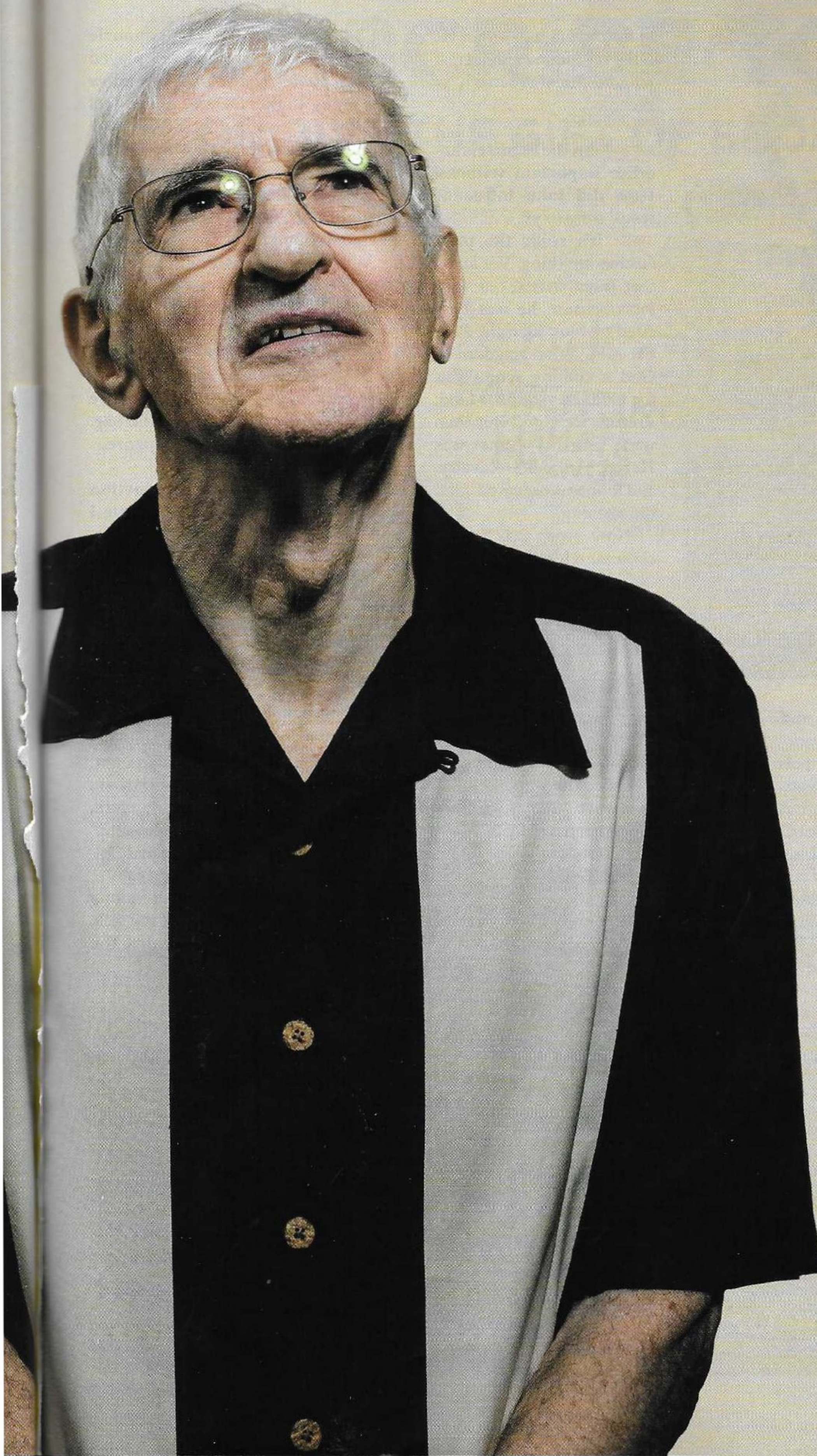
**AVS:** You approach your research from a strictly historical perspective. How does that affect your faith?

**JDC:** It has strengthened my faith and made it far more viable. If you have faith but don't

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BY  
**ALICIA  
VON STAMWITZ**  
@avonstamwitz





have the historical background, you really have superstition.

If you are happy with a rather traditional don't-ask-questions type of faith, my research is going to bother you the same way that a two-year-old will be bothered if you tell him there's no Santa Claus. But at a certain point kids grow up, and at a certain point adults should grow up with their religion, too. What faith means for me is always asking questions. Borrowing from Socrates, I'd say the unexamined faith is probably superstition.

**AVS:** That reminds me of your work with the Jesus Seminar. Can you tell us about that?

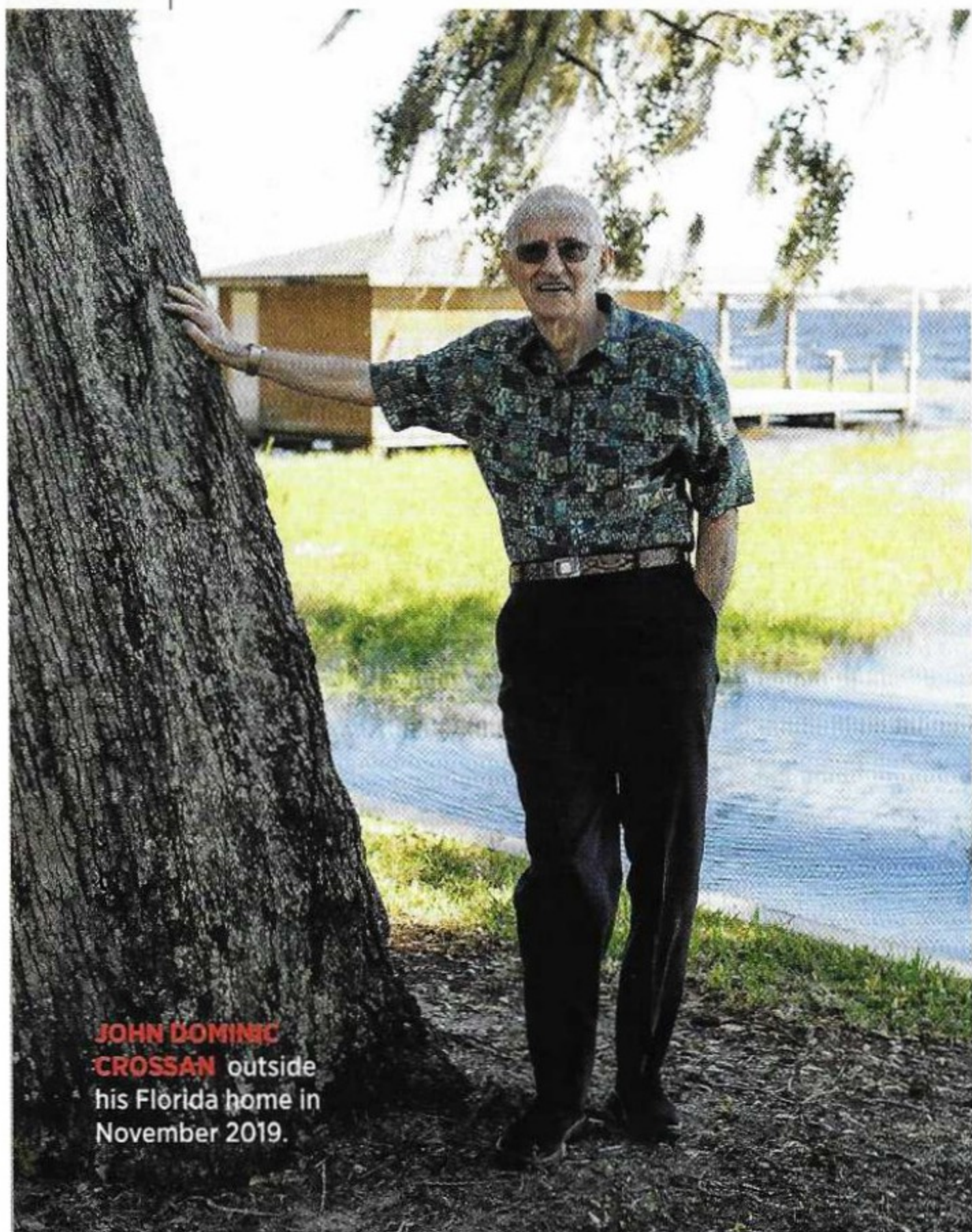
**JDC:** Bob Funk founded it in 1985 and asked me to be co-chair. He said it's good that we scholars have all these discussions about the historical Jesus in our scholarly magazines and conferences, but let's do our work out in the public. We saw it as an ethical necessity that interested lay people should know what scholars were saying so they'd be educated — not indoctrinated — and make their own decisions.

**AVS:** Can you give us an example of one of those discussions?

**JDC:** There was a massive consensus in scholarship that of the materials attributed to Jesus in the four Gospels, some came from Jesus, some came from the tradition about Jesus, and some came from the evangelists. But Matthew, Mark, Luke and John always put the words on the lips of Jesus. That's the way they did it back then. So when John writes, "Jesus said" followed by a big long speech — well, no. Jesus probably did not say that.

**AVS:** In addition to Jesus' words, you emphasize that we should





**JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN** outside his Florida home in November 2019.

**pay attention to what Jesus does and doesn't do.**

**JDC:** Yes. The writers of the Gospels are completely convinced that Jesus can do whatever he wants to do, but you don't see him lifting the Pharisees five feet in the air and dropping them on their heads. So that's how you know that when Matthew writes those nasty rebukes, "You brood of vipers and hypocrites! You're going to hell!" what you're really getting is Matthew's exasperation.

**AVS:** Is there a core message about the historical Jesus that you'd like to get across?

**JDC:** Let me say the crucial one for me — and absolutely the most historical — is that Pilate is the most important witness to Jesus in the entire New Testament. Because the Roman method of dealing with a violent rebellion is to crucify the leader and his followers. For non-violent resistance, the Romans crucified only the leader. Nothing is said about Pilate rounding up and crucifying the apostles. So if I know only one thing, it's that Jesus was crucified for non-violent resistance

to Roman law and order. He is the only founder of a great religion that was actually so executed.

**AVS:** John the Baptist is another important witness. How did John influence Jesus' ministry?

**JDC:** It's really the most fascinating thing. We know that Jesus started out with John because he was baptized by him. John the Baptist said, "The kingdom of God is coming soon. Wait for God. Be ready for God. Prepare for God." But then what actually came was Herod Antipas's cavalry, and John was executed. God did nothing.

Now Jesus has a few choices. He can abandon the whole thing and go back to Nazareth. Or he can pick up the fallen banner of John the Baptist and say, "He just got the date wrong. The kingdom is still coming

soon — but it's coming next year." Or he can say, "Wait a minute. We've been waiting for God to do this for 700 years, since Isaiah. Maybe the whole thing is wrong." This is what I think Jesus said, in effect, "We've been waiting for God to do it for us, and God has been waiting for us to do it with God."

**AVS:** Can you say more about that?

**JDC:** The kingdom of God is here, but only if you enter into it. Only if you take it upon you. It's not like an empty building that's there whether you or I are in it. It's a community. The shift between John the Baptist and Jesus is summarized in that accusation that's made about both of them by their enemies: that one fasts and the other feasts. I think that is right, because you fast in preparation for what's coming, and you feast in celebration of what's present.

**AVS:** And what's your take on the Gospel's accounts of miracles such as the healing power of Jesus?

**JDC:** Anthropologists make a distinction between curing and healing. A

good illustration of this is the movie *Philadelphia*. The character played by Tom Hanks isn't cured. We know he's going to die. So why do we feel good at the end of that movie? We feel good because he was healed. He was healed because his partner, his family, his colleagues — they all supported him. There was a whole community around him.

What I see Jesus doing when he heals people is bringing them into a new community. He takes in people who may see themselves as a burden or an embarrassment and brings them in. That's all. However it's done, somehow in this new community they are not a liability or a shame. They belong. I think that's what actually happened.

**AVS:** That's a helpful distinction when I think about all the people I know who have not been cured despite their fervent prayers.

**JDC:** Yes. I went to Lourdes in France as a chaplain when I was a priest, and what I found extraordinary is that 40 sick people were brought there and told, "If your faith is strong enough, you'll be cured." Later, I would watch the same 40 people on the same stretchers get back on their planes. Nothing had changed. And I'm trying to figure out: why aren't they crushed? Not only are they still as sick as they always were, but clearly their faith was "inadequate." They should be doubly crushed. Instead, they seem to be feeling great.

All I can say is that the community at Lourdes is a community of the sick. If you're sick, you're at the centre. You have a place. You're not the weirdo who doesn't fit in.

**AVS:** How would you characterize religious practice today?

**JDC:** I watch quite carefully what we're not talking about, and we're talking an awful lot about spirituality at the moment and not a lot about religion.

I understand that, because so much of organized religion has betrayed itself. It really has. But the trouble is, so has organized politics. If there's no organized politics, we all go our own way. It's the lack of organization that makes you irrelevant, and that's what I'm afraid of. *This interview has been edited and condensed for length and clarity.*