Quarterly Review of the John Paul II Institute
ISSUE THREE

Humanum
Issues in Family, Culture & Science

Barely Alive … Fully Alive

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Birth. Death. What lies in between? A short span, often punctuated by suffering and loneliness. Each of us must wrestle with the "perennial problem of human finitude" (Ratzinger) and face the question of our life's meaning. Is it good . . . fundamentally? Does it promise anything? Does it keep its promise? Absent hope in a good answer, we try to escape reality with numbing diversions of various kinds—from screens to drugs. We hang on, *barely alive*. Instead, when we attend to the glimpses of goodness in our existence, it is possible to engage it *fully alive* in the hope that our finitude will blossom into the abundance of eternal life.

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WITNESS

The Good Life and the Price of Admission

JULIA HARRELL

It was the kind of Sunday afternoon made for a baseball game: a cloudless blue sky, the air warm but not oppressive. We had spent the last few hours in the cheap seats, with the free tickets you get for participating in the library's summer reading program. My husband and I took turns apologetically climbing over our neighbors, ferrying a newly potty-trained toddler back and forth for allegedly urgent but mostly unproductive visits to the restroom. In between said trips, my older kids spilled popcorn, argued about who had consumed more fluid ounces of a shared milkshake, and complained about being forced to endure the free kids' meal hot dog, rather than selecting a $20 meal of their choice. My husband and I have an adage for these sorts of things: this is the price of admission. The family outing extracts its payment in visits to public restrooms of variable cleanliness and protracted spending limit negotiations.

As we descended the upper deck pedestrian ramp to begin the trek back to our minivan, I glanced up and saw a group of people at the rooftop pool of one of the luxury condo buildings surrounding the ballpark. A Sunday afternoon with no obligations beyond hanging out poolside, having drinks, and watching the professional baseball game visible just below. The good life.

I flirted with the idea—the memory, really—of what it would be like *not* to be transporting four children in varying states of meltdown, not to be mentally planning ahead for what I was going to feed them when we got home, not to have a ketchup stain from someone's hot dog on my shorts. To be at the pool having a drink with people for whom I am not responsible, people who do not make claims on every moment of my time, on every square inch of my body, and every dollar in my bank account. People who would later retreat to their own apartments and leave me to mine.

This, after all, is the highest aspiration of our contemporary society. To be free of obligations and burdens, to have no interpersonal ties that are not chosen, optional, and dissolvable. To be a self-defining individual with all options on the table, only awaiting one's choice.

Everything in us resists the notion of giving away ourselves, our time, our money,

our body. But clutching what is ours in the tight fist of autonomy leaves us with only the things that decay and die.

My own options are far fewer since I was in the position of the rooftop revelers. The infinite vistas of youth have narrowed. It occurred to me that if I decided that I'd like to become a doctor, that path is no longer available. The years of prerequisite classes, the MCATS, medical school, residency; by the time I was done, I wouldn't have enough working years left to pay off the loans. This consideration was irrelevant; I'm not interested in a medical career. Yet the reality that all possibilities are no longer available to me, that I have made choices that tie me firmly to places and work that cannot be easily altered or overthrown, was a shock. It chafed. What if I want to be a doctor? I can be anything I want!

Except that I can't. No one can. The desire to have, do, or be anything we want is not really the goal, though. No matter our particular desires—the specific things we want to have or do or be—it is the promise of happiness that draws us: the good life. The good news is that the good life, unlike rooftop pools and medical careers, is available to everyone, regardless of their station in life.

Elizabeth Ann Seton, first American-born saint, knew well what it means to live the good life: to live in the will of God at all times, in any circumstances. In fact, this was her personal rule of life. "The first end I propose in our daily work is to do the will of God, secondly to do it in the manner He wills; and thirdly to do it because it is His will."

Born to an affluent, socially connected Episcopalian family in New York, Elizabeth Bayley's early life was the 18th-century version of rooftop pools and cocktails. She traveled in socially prestigious circles and received the best of everything. At nineteen, Elizabeth married William Seton, a handsome and successful young businessman. They were deeply in love with one another, had five children, and enjoyed an active role in New York's elite social circles. The good life.

Then William's business began to fail. The demands for payment on outstanding debts arrived on their doorstep in unrelenting waves. William contracted tuberculosis. Bedridden and coughing up blood, tending to his business concerns was out of the question. It must have seemed to Elizabeth that the ground under her feet was collapsing.

In search of a cure, Elizabeth and William traveled to Italy for its mild weather. Was there an element of flight from the twin disasters of William's health and business failures? Perhaps, but this decision to accompany her husband across the ocean, amidst the crumbling ruins of what had been their lives, brought Elizabeth to the place of her conversion. Among the stained-glass saints and warm glow of sacred gold vessels in Italy's Catholic churches, Elizabeth encountered the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Before that, though, the Setons were placed in a quarantine lazaretto upon arrival. The damp stone walls and chill, briny drafts that wound their way through every crack and crevice did little to improve William's health. Just days after their release from the lazaretto, William succumbed to his illness. Elizabeth was widowed in a foreign land, one child at her side and four more awaiting her return home, thousands of miles across the ocean. Such circumstances would tempt the fiercest among us to despair.

Again and again, in the cross, Elizabeth found grace, which, as the saying goes, is free but not cheap.

Weather and politics and illness conspired to delay Elizabeth's return to America and her children, and she found herself in Italy during Lent, sheltered by her friends, the Filicchi family. A devout Christian from the earliest days of childhood, Elizabeth was now praying and attending Mass in Italy's Catholic churches with her hosts, drawn by the beauty of the liturgy, the basilicas and shrines, the sacraments.

In a letter home to her sister-in-law, Rebecca, Elizabeth wrote that Antonio Filicchi had taught her to make the sign of the cross. "I was cold with the awful impression my first making it gave me. The Sign of the CROSS of Christ on me."

After returning to New York, Elizabeth was tormented by the question of conversion. She sat praying in the pews of the familiar Trinity Church, but found her eyes leaving Trinity's bare altar and alighting on Old St. Peter's across the street, where she spoke to Christ in the tabernacle. It was her belief that Jesus Christ was truly present in the Blessed Sacrament, that He awaited the faithful in the tabernacle and was carried to them in their need, that led Elizabeth, finally, to become Catholic.

Her conversion demanded an embrace of the cross that few contemporary Americans understand. It was not a personal choice dictating little more than the location at which she would spend her Sunday mornings. It meant social ostracization and years of financial instability, with five children to support. Teaching jobs were closed to her because of her Catholic faith, and the school she began failed when families learned of her conversion. Her entry into the Church entailed a relinquishing of everything we consider the good life, an abandonment of comfort and security for the suffering and uncertainty of the cross.

This was a price Elizabeth was willing to pay. Upon receiving Holy Communion for the first time, Elizabeth considered this cross, "a triumph of joy and gladness that the deliverer had come…I feel all the powers of my soul held fast by him who came with so much Majesty to take possession of this poor little kingdom."

A new life began to open before her. Archbishop Carroll of Baltimore invited her to begin the first American Catholic school in Baltimore. Elizabeth took her children to Baltimore, beginning over again. Before long, the Sulpician priests brought her several young women with the request that she begin a new order of American religious. Elizabeth was given the title "Mother Seton," and the women moved to rural Emmitsburg, Maryland to begin the Daughters of Charity. Elizabeth loved Emmitsburg and her home there, but not because she had arrived in a place free from suffering. In Emmitsburg, she suffered the politics and interpersonal conflicts that plague all human interaction, attempts to undermine her authority, and the devastating loss of two daughters to tuberculosis. Yet, Elizabeth remained steadfast in her willingness to do the will of God. "I am a mother. Whatever providence awaits me consistent with that plea, I say Amen to it."

Elizabeth Ann Seton's life was everything our culture views as oppressive and limiting: an early marriage, five children, devout religious observance, voluntary poverty, celibacy, and service to others. Again and again, in the cross, Elizabeth found grace, which, as the saying goes, is free but not cheap. It was the sign of the cross upon her own body, first experienced in

Italy, that spoke to her of the price of admission to the life of grace. Our efforts to eliminate the cross from our lives cannot and do not eliminate suffering. They only empty it of its meaning and power, depriving the sufferer of life-giving grace. In the spiritual economy, the grace of the cross means new life, the good life.

The good life—the genuinely good life—is a rebuke to contemporary egoism. Everything in us resists the notion of giving away ourselves, our time, our money, our body. But clutching what is ours in the tight fist of autonomy leaves us with only the things that decay and die. Relinquishing what is ours grants returns of one hundredfold.

Reflecting on the sufferings and losses of her own life, Elizabeth describes a small bird who is driven from one branch and alights on another, moved along by disturbing hands until at last he finds himself leaving the highest branch, taking wing and soaring into the sky. So are we, she concludes, when we are chased from one perch to another by the trials that strip us of our crutches and buttresses. Such suffering purifies us, makes us aim higher, until we take flight in the will of God himself.

The appeal of the rooftop pool scene is obvious, the view from the cheap seats less so. This is not a rebuke of the former, only a call not to grasp at it, clutching it in hand past its time. The good life isn't a particular station in life, an income threshold, or zip code. There are as many versions of the good life as there are lives. In any given existence, the good life is free for the taking, though it's not cheap. The price of admission is nothing less than the cross, opening up the encounter with regenerative grace at every place and time, stirring us from branch to branch until we find ourselves.

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BOOK REVIEW

Escape into the Real with the Saints

CHARITY HILL

John Cavadini and Catherine Cavadini, illus. Anastassia Cassady, *Saints: A Family Story* (Paraclete Press, 2023).

You may wonder, do we really need another saint book? Didn't the good Fr. Lovasik say everything in his 101 titles of the *Saint Joseph Picture Book Series*?

Too often images of saints for young and very young children are "flat and friendly," digitally produced and barely differentiated. A familiar example are the banal illustrations of *MagnifiKid*. Though the written content of the publication runs from decent to excellent, its illustrations are easy-to-ignore images, which leave the viewer wishing for greater insight into character and meaning.

Many illustrations of saints simply lack technical skill and demonstrate a failure to apply the elements of art to their creation. Or they rely on modern "visual tropes," such as making the images of saints approximate the oversize-eyed characters popularized by TV and movie marketing. *The Boy Who Became Pope* written and illustrated by Fabiola Garza attempts to win over children in this way. An ironic and grave flaw in our children's picture books is so often the pictures, which don't symbolize or point to anything.

Depictions of the saints must, in written and artistic form, invite children to "escape into the real." The words and illustrations must not just convey information but a proposal that "Christ takes absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great…and he gives you everything" (Pope Benedict XVI). Too many saint books fail to live out this proposal either through lackluster writing or tame illustration.

Reality is already approachable, multidimensional, and highly attractive. … Children want to know the world as it is and that this seeking to know things for

what they are includes saints.

Stories of the Saints by Carey Wallace and illustrated by Nick Thornborrow is an exception. It offers the most incisive writing regarding the saints. Wallace writes a gripping introduction (who else can claim their introduction is gripping?), asking "Who are the saints?" and "Are these stories true?" and even proposes that the lives of the saints imply a response from us.

> Saints aren't people who are always good and never afraid. They're people who believe there must be more to life than just what we can see. This world may be hard and unfair, but saints believe in a God who is bigger than the world, whose law is love… They tell us that when people stand up for justice or mercy or love, they may see miracles, but they may find themselves in mortal danger. Or both.

Wallace's writing is powerful, direct, and insightful. Thornborrow's illustrations dare a great deal and are less reliably good; some illustrations are interesting, some are odd, and others look vaguely evil. As a video game designer, Thornborrow appreciates heroism, but he is hardly steeped in the Christian visual tradition. Consequently, his outside-the-box interpretations can be either insightful (St. Sebastian) or ugly and bizarre (St. Augustine, St. John Vianney). Even a book as appealing as Wallace's has a significant limitation.

So, do we need more picture books on the saints, then? *Saints: A Family Story* written by John and Catherine Cavadini (a father-daughter author team) and illustrated by Anastassia Cassady offers a uniquely excellent response. We need more saint stories if they demonstrate the intelligence and craft, human insight, age-appropriate detail, challenge-level conversation opportunities, and loving and gifted artwork evident in the Cavadini-Cassady effort.

Often what is most surprising about Cassady's illustrations is how fitting they are, while still full of novelty. For example, at first glance the illustration of St. Joseph could seem to be another St. Joseph-the-Worker stained glass window, like a hundred others. But immediately the viewer notices something different: the illustration is partly like stained glass, partly like an icon, but with such a friendly expression, as if Joseph looked up from his carpentry in mid-swing to notice you standing in his workshop. As a man of piercing intensity, John the Baptist is hard to capture. Cassady shows him looking wild, his hair stringy and blown back, but his eyes calmly focused and entirely sane.

Cassady makes use of traditional iconography but uses it in occasionally unexpected ways. For the image of St. Augustine, the figure is painted and the background is mosaic; he holds a pear in his right hand while in his left he holds the text of Romans 13:13 in Latin: "As in a day we walk honestly, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy," with the first letters of the book's facing page implying the next stage of St. Augustine's life, when he would "[i]nstead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." Cassady cares enough to include it, as an untranslated Easter egg for the curious (or educated) reader.

St. Monica is depicted as a youthful, beautiful, serious North African woman, ornamented with chandelier earrings along with a golden halo. Cassady often takes up a medium or style that is native to the saint's place, such as depicting Rose of Lima with a colorful Peruvian serape and braids as well as her image on Peruvian currency. Servant of God Takashi Nagai is depicted in a traditional Japanese painting style (nihonga or kanō).

To put a saint into his own visual-symbolic cultural context is illuminating, when so many other crafters illustrate saints in cartoonish, flat, simplistic ways in order to make them "approachable" for children. The Cavadinis and Cassady understand that reality is already approachable, multidimensional, and highly attractive. They understand that children want to know the world as it is and that this seeking to know things for what they are includes saints.

Regarding the written content of *Saints*, the Cavadinis' narrative on the saints is conditioned by two seemingly opposite poles—thorough academic research and a thorough understanding of children. John Cavadini and Catherine Cavadini are professors of theology at the University of Notre Dame, so it is not unusual that they have a mastery of the available data. Yet, as a grandfather and a mother, they also possess a mastery for disclosing the marvelous and humble meaning of each saint's life in terms that awaken wonder, attraction, and imitation. If you were going to research a saint and tell your child or grandchild in your own words about the saint's life and charism, your telling would likely have the warm tone of *Saints: A Family Story*. Hopefully, it would also have its depth and texture. The Cavadinis do not allow even saints like St. Monica or St. Francis to be flattened into the standard labels of "weepy" and "animal-lover." And they use rich literary sources, such as Sigrid Undset's biography of Catherine of Siena, as material for their narrative. In fact, I prefer their telling to Undset's, which seems to portray Catherine as always-nearly-perfect and renders her unbelievable and inscrutable. One sentence in particular breaks open the life of St. Catherine in a way that the more hagiographical Undset never did: "All of these acts of love gave Catherine the courage to speak to important people who were making terrible mistakes, because she knew that when she was telling them to reform and make better decisions, she would be saying it out of love."

Occasionally, in its effort to be conversational, the writing is clumsy and lacks lucidity. In the narrative on the life of Venerable Augustus Tolton, the first Black Catholic priest ordained in the United States, the Cavadinis struggle to interweave smoothly and consistently an analogy about struggle, raging rivers, stormy seas, and all people being in the barque of the Church. In a rare case, the lack of coherence and focus is more striking: In the biography of St. Gianna Molla, the narrative moves backward, forward, and back again in time, referencing the testimony of St. Gianna's husband Pietro and requiring young readers to employ several layers of abstract thinking regarding time, relationships, and the canonization process. Among sundry beautiful points the authors intend is that St. Gianna shows how "even your mom could become a saint," but this point is made too obliquely and without concrete reference to the details of St. Gianna's life. The authors appear to be undecided regarding which aspects of St. Gianna's life they want to highlight.

Despite the occasional lack of written clarity, the warmth of the Cavadinis' narrative and Cassady's artistic agility adapted to each saint render *Saints: A Family Story* a uniquely unified book. It is altogether the best saint book currently available, conveying in word and picture that "it is Jesus you seek when you dream of happiness; He is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is He who provoked you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise" (Pope St. John Paul II).

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BOOK REVIEW

The Purifying Fire of Real Marriage

CONOR B. DUGAN

Harrison Scott Key, *How to Stay Married: The Most Insane Love Story Ever Told* (Avid Reader Press / Simon and Schuster, 2023).

Marriage is an institution battered by twin forces. On the one side are the cynics and the increasing number of people who see no point in it. To be yoked to another person for life seems like an unbearable hell. It is banal and bourgeois. It limits and crushes. The evident pain and tragic betrayals do not seem worth the price of admission. On the other are the idealists, those who sugarcoat and romanticize marriage. These see the marriage bed as heaven on earth and a good marriage as the simple product of piety and hard work.

Harrison Scott Key's *How to Stay Married: The Most Insane Love Story Ever Told* speaks to these dueling forces. In his beautifully told, poignant, and searing memoir, Key makes the case for *real* marriage. To those who doubt marriage is worth it, he says, "Make the leap." To those who idealize marriage, he says, "Be prepared." To both he shows that for a marriage to survive and thrive, it needs to be embedded in a larger culture and community, a community of friends, family, prayer, sinners, and saints. The married couple cannot be an island unto themselves. And Key does it all with his characteristic humor and warmth.

A memoirist needs a good story and Key learns he's living one in early October 2017. His wife Lauren emails him that they need to talk that night about "Life." Key wonders if she might have an addiction or whether she's about to confront him about his drinking—an "online diagnostic" test tells him he's no alcoholic. He thinks she may be depressed or wants to have another baby. But it isn't addictions or babies or depression she wants to talk about. She wants a divorce because she's in love with someone else.

Rather than turning to self-pity—or divorce—the revelation begins a process of discovery for Key. Key uses the revelations and the up-and-down process of working to save his marriage to think through his marriage and the institution of marriage, to dissect how he and Lauren arrived at this point, and to recognize what flaws and faults of his contributed to the breach. While Key never excuses Lauren's infidelity, he recognizes that it didn't arise in a vacuum. In this process of discovery, Key proposes universal lessons for marriage that are relevant for all

people whether married, single, or religious. A married couple need not have suffered anything nearly as traumatic as an affair to profit greatly from those lessons. Key's book, besides being utterly hilarious, addresses the twin forces of cynicism and idealism that threaten the institution of marriage itself.

The cynics fail to see the redemptive suffering-in-communion of persons that marriage can be. The idealist's approach is emblematic of a vision of marriage that does not candidly acknowledge the reality that the Cross will find one in marriage; the Cross is present in *every* vocation.

Key's argument is that real marriage is hard but also an adventure on which it is worth embarking. It is from the crucible that is marriage, that something good, beautiful, and greater than the sum of its parts can be generated. To the idealists, Key writes: "Nobody ever told me that every marriage comes to this cataract in the river many times over, that every marriage goes over the falls. The two of you go tumbling across the smooth mossy rocks of time, and down you go and some couples die and some don't, but everybody goes toppling." Lauren, who authors a chapter of the book, echoes a similar theme: "No one really talks about marriage struggles. Not Christians. Not the real struggles. Sex, pain, anger, loneliness. Not a word. You'd think they would. Christians love to talk about sin and struggle, but we look past the many nightmares of marriage like an army of the blind."

Not every married couple will face the sort of crisis Key and Lauren faced. But they will go over the falls. There will be crises and mini-crises. Sufferings. Loneliness. We need to equip people jumping into the adventure of marriage with this knowledge. Key notes, "I'd witnessed many weddings . . . and never heard a single officiant explain the crucible of suffering that awaits every married couple."

Yet, such candor would seem to reinforce the cynics' view and for good reason. What Key is describing seems the very real hell from which the cynic rightly wants to run. But Key doesn't stop there. Key's acknowledgment that such suffering will come isn't throwing a wet blanket on the celebration but recognizing the grand and beautiful adventure the couple is entering. To the cynics, Key says, marriage is the furnace that purifies and sanctifies. That is something we *need* as human beings. He writes:

> Whatever your feelings about Christ being the bridegroom and the church being the bride, here's what I've come to see: Rome slaughtered Jesus, and that's what marriage will do. It will slay you, crucify and burn and behead you and everything you thought you knew about yourself. And the thing that is left, after all is burned and plucked away, that is the real you.

Marriage is worth it because of the transformation that it works upon the couple. Thus, near, the end of *How to Stay Married*, Key asks:

> What if the prophets [of the present age] are wrong? Are we not freer than ever in human history, and sadder, and more anxious, more wretched? What if marriage, at its very best, exists to remake us into beautiful new creatures we scarcely recognize? What if, in some cosmically weird way, escaping a hard

> marriage is not how you change? What if staying married is?

Here, one hears an echo of Joseph Ratzinger's line about Christ who "burns and transforms evil in suffering, in the fire of his suffering love." While not all the struggles of marriage are evil, and even the evils might not rise to those faced by Key and his wife, these struggles borne in love are what refashion and remake us. They burn away the impurities and fashion a new creation. And that is an adventure worth undertaking.

But the adventure of real marriage is only possible if embedded within and supported by a larger community of love. For marriages to survive and thrive, one needs grace, prayer, and others. For marriages to survive and thrive, the Church must truly be the Body of Christ—it must be a true *communio*. That means that the Church must be present and supportive of couples in good times and in crisis, it cannot purvey abstractions but tangible, flesh-and-blood charity—it must show us the sort of self-emptying love that St. Teresa of Calcutta showed to those in the slums.

The night Key learned of his wife's affair, he became a beggar before God. He "crawled out of bed and onto the floor," and said, "God. Help. Help me. Help me to know what is real." Key and his wife "were the people who had killed our marriage," but it was going to have to be they, along "with *the help of beings both divine and mortal*," who would "make it live again." Indeed, as Key writes, "[i]f you want your marriage to survive, you need people in your life who believe in the idea of it." These were friends who believed that there was a real fight going on between us and principalities and powers.

And such friends cannot recite platitudes and abstractions in these moments of crisis. Key talks about the sort of faith that was needed in his moment of crisis. It wasn't a false sense of piety. It didn't offer abstract and abstruse theories:

> What did our church do for us, exactly? They came when I called. Handed children to their spouses and got in the car. They listened to news nobody wants to hear. They sat with Lauren, too. They did not tell her she was doing a bad thing and must now do this or that good thing to fix it. She seemed plenty familiar with the moral equations in play. They did not give answers, not at first. They did the harder thing and asked questions. What does it feel like to be her? And in the answering, her heart awoke to something. To know people could see your inside and not revile you, this seemed a surprising new variable of the equation.

These were Christians who knew how to love. In the deepest and darkest moments of pain in the book, Key describes his friends' unwavering love. They didn't offer pat solutions. They offered their presence. In them, Key discovers truly that God is love and what that love means—a self-emptying that needs to be recapitulated within marriage itself. And in experiencing the searing and purifying nature of love, Key realizes the concrete nature of God and his love: "What if God and Jesus are metaphors for something too impossible to fathom, which we attempt to fathom anyway? What if the endless fathoming is our duty? What if God and Jesus aren't metaphors at all? What if they're real? What if everything else is a metaphor for *them*?"

How to Stay Married is a profound book that offers a portrait of *real* marriage that answers both the cynics and the idealists. The cynics fail to see the redemptive suffering-in-communion of persons that marriage can be. The idealist's approach is emblematic of a vision of marriage

that does not candidly acknowledge the reality that the Cross will find one in marriage; the Cross is present in *every* vocation. With the cynics, we need to acknowledge the very real suffering that marriage can be but then demonstrate that that suffering can and *does* find purpose in the larger context of the communion of husband and wife and the communion of family, friends, church, and city who need to support and build up each marriage for it to flourish. To them, we need to show marriage as a path to true human fulfillment. With the idealists, we need to help shore them up when the inevitable bumps in the road occur, so they don't run for the hills and give up.

Marriage lived and embodied within a community of love and prayer is a privileged pathway to virtue and sanctification. Key's book has changed me for the better. And based on my unscientific sampling of people who have read it on my recommendation, it has changed many others. That *How to Stay Married* offers profound lessons and is an important book does not mean it is ever pedantic. This is a gripping story told well. It is not a sermon. If you want to have your heart crushed and rebuilt again all while chortling and crying, run, don't walk to read this incredible book.

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RE-SOURCE: CLASSIC TEXT

The Problem of Drugs

CARDINAL JOSEPH RATZINGER

The following is an excerpt from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's A Turning Point for Europe? The Church in the Modern World: Assessment and Forecast *(trans. Brian McNeil C.R.V. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010; 1st ed. 1994): 24–26). It is reproduced here with the gracious permission of Ignatius Press.*

The Problem of Drugs

I recall a debate I had with some friends in Ernst Bloch's house. Our conversation chanced to hit on the problem of drugs, which at that time—in the late 1960s—was just beginning to arise. We wondered how this temptation could spread so suddenly now, and why, for example, it had apparently not existed at all in the Middle Ages. All were agreed in rejecting as insufficient the answer that at that period the areas where drugs were cultivated were too far away. Phenomena like the appearance of drugs are not to be explained by means of such external conditions; they come from deeper needs or lacks, while dealing with the concrete problems of procurement follows later. I ventured the hypothesis that obviously in the Middle Ages the emptiness of the soul, which drugs are an attempt to fill, did not exist: the thirst of the soul, of the inner man, found an answer that made drugs unnecessary. I can still recall the speechless indignation with which Mrs. Bloch reacted to this proposed solution. On the basis of dialectical materialism's image of history, she found the idea almost criminal that past ages could have been superior to our own in not wholly inessential matters; it was impossible that the masses could have lived with greater happiness and inner harmony in the Middle Ages—a period of oppression and religious prejudices—than in our age, which has already made some degree of progress along the path of liberation: this would entail the collapse of the entire logic of "liberation." But how, then, is one to explain what has happened? The question remained unanswered that evening.

The "great journey" that men attempt in drugs is the perversion of mysticism, the perversion of the human need for infinity, the rejection of the impossibility of transcending immanence, and the attempt to extend the limits of one's own

existence into the infinite.

Since I do not share the materialistic image of the world, I continue to believe that my thesis was correct. Naturally, however, it must be made more concrete, and it is precisely the thinking of Ernst Bloch that can offer a helpful starting point here. For Bloch, the world of facts is a bad world. The principle of hope means that man energetically contradicts the facts; he knows he is obliged to overcome the bad world of facts in order to create a better world. I would put it in this way: drugs are a form of protest against facts. The one who takes them refuses to resign himself to the world of facts. He seeks a better world. Drugs are the result of despair in a world experienced as a dungeon of facts, in which man cannot hold out for long. Naturally, many other things are involved, too: the search for adventure; the conformity of joining in what others are doing; the cleverness of the dealers, and so on. But the core is a protest against a reality perceived as a prison. The “great journey” that men attempt in drugs is the perversion of mysticism, the perversion of the human need for infinity, the rejection of the impossibility of transcending immanence, and the attempt to extend the limits of one’s own existence into the infinite. The patient and humble adventure of asceticism, which, in small steps of ascent, comes closer to the descending God, is replaced by magical power, the magical key of drugs—the ethical and religious path is replaced by technology. Drugs are the pseudo-mysticism of a world that does not believe yet cannot rid of the soul’s yearning for paradise. Thus, drugs are a warning sign that points to [something] very profound: not only do they disclose a vacuum in our society, which that society’s own instruments cannot fill, but they also point to an inner claim of man’s nature, a claim that asserts itself in a perverted form if it does not find the correct answer.