

Mission Among the Ruins: Touchstones for Ministry in a World that has Lost its Story

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Editors' Preface: We in the West now live in a world that collectively has no Christian memory. That means a blank slate awaits us. Like the early Christians, we live in a pagan world that has no touchstones to govern and direct its passions. Consequently, we live in a culture in rapid freefall. In 2019 DOXOLOGY invited Prof. Esolen, cultural analyst and humanities scholar, to provide a framework to address these issues comprehensively and Christianly.

LECTURE ONE **Surveying the Rubble: A Hard Look at Cultural Decay**

The first step in healing is an accurate diagnosis. In this session, we learn the extent of our collective cultural illness so that we can better seek a remedy.

Any man who speaks about the collapse of his culture or civilization must meet the charge that the same things have been said by other people in other places and at other times, and yet we are still here. The sun still rises in the east and sets in the west; children are born and grow to adulthood; men and women marry, have children, grow old, and die; and nothing is new under the sun. “We have heard it before,” they will say. At the beginning of his history of the Roman people, Livy says that he intends for his reader to “trace the process of our moral decline, to watch, first, the sinking of the foundations of morality as the old teaching was allowed to lapse, then the rapidly increasing degeneration, then the final collapse of the whole edifice, and the dark dawning of our modern day when we can neither endure our vices nor face the

remedies needed to cure them.” Yet when he wrote those words, Rome, reconstituted as an empire with still strong and effectual features of the old republic, was on the verge of two hundred years of relative peace and prosperity. Should we not then dismiss the grumbling of old men, who remember and even enhance the good things of their youth, who miss what is no longer in their midst, who treat new good things with suspicion and scorn, and who exaggerate the sins of the generations who have arisen to take their place from them?

There are, I think, three ways to address this objection. The first is to say that the diagnosis of decline, to be valid, need not touch upon all the features of a civilization. What Livy describes as degeneration may not have been true of the small farmers in the countryside, who had doggedly kept to the old virtue of *pietas* or piety, the fulfilling of your duty to your father and mother, to your ancestors before them who were now the tutelary gods of your household, to your *patria* or fatherland, and to the great gods above and below. Such people, stubborn in their relative poverty and their healthy manual

labor, were the last to be brought around to the Christian faith, hence the faintly depreciating name by which they were called, *pagani*, that is, hillbillies, rednecks, *pagans*, as we call them because the word came to denote generally those who did not acknowledge Jesus as Lord. But in the large cities, and especially in Rome and among the aristocrats, the moral tenor lay somewhere among whore, swindler, and assassin. Rome really had undergone a century in which assassinations had become a political hobby. Think of Cicero, traveling in a litter toward Rome, but stopped on the way by the henchmen of his enemy Mark Antony. The old man bared his neck and stretched it out in scorn, waiting for the sword. It was a time when armies loyal to their commanders and not to the state fought against one another. Think of Caesar crossing the Rubicon with what was essentially *his army* and not the army of the state. It was a time when the lives of the upper class were sinkholes of luxury and vice.

That would remain the case long after Livy had died and after the death of Marcus Aurelius, the last of the so-called “good emperors.” Rome would be pitched into political chaos for a hundred years with one emperor rapidly succeeding another, the great majority of them murdered often by members of their own guard. So, if I point out our cultural decline, I need not deny that we have antibiotics. Cultural decline is seldom universal. You can usually point out some regard in which things have not collapsed. A slave in the time of Domitian enjoyed more legal protection than did a slave in the time of Scipio Africanus, but Domitian was cruel and mad, and the great poet Juvenal, writing in that time, says of the rabble in Rome that all you need to keep them from rebellion is bread and circuses. Cato the Elder, that stern old moralist living in better times, sweated in the fields alongside his slaves but sold them off like swaybacked horses when they were no longer of financial use to him. We can, in

our time, note that black people need not suffer the indignity of drinking from separate water fountains. But most of their children suffer the greater and irremediable harm of growing up without a father in the home. That was by no means the case in 1900 or even 1950.

The second answer is that cultures do decline and die. What was left of Sparta, that great military power, by the time of Plutarch? A pigsty with a broken fence, as I have called it. What was left of Athens? The groveling schoolmaster of the world, Athens was. The days of the great tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, were hardly more than a memory. What she had to give the world, in philosophy and statesmanship, she had already given, and now she was little more than an old lady trussed up in dresses out of fashion, who comes to visit her rich cousins and somehow never manages to go back home. It was said that the sun never set on the British Empire. That sun has set and will not rise again. In 1980, I heard people say that Ronald Reagan was a dangerous fool to believe that we could triumph over the Soviet Union. In ten years, the Soviet Union was dead. Where

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are the bones of Fabricius? Where is the Prussia of Frederick the Great? Where is the emperor of Japan? Heaven and earth shall pass away, says Jesus. And we are to suppose that the United States will not?

The third response is to show the decline in all its specific failures and its shame. After the Goths had taken control of the Roman state in the west, central Europe was pitched into a dark age, and, in some backwater places, I am told, a well-known technological invention was lost: *the wheel*. Pope Gregory the Great

was quite aware that his Latin could not match that of the authors in the days of Cicero, and textual scholars can identify a late Latin text by its grammatical errors and its reduced or vulgarized vocabulary. Periods of decline are notable for shoddy workmanship in arts and crafts, by the disappearance of entire fields of art and thought, by debility in important social institutions—supposing that they survive at all, and sometimes by a loss of transcendent purpose, a loss of any sense that you are embedded in a story that spans the generations, that has a meaning and an aim. It is the loss of anything for which you would lay down your life. The Spartans lost that. The Athenians lost that. We Americans too have lost that.

So let me notice what is in front of my eyes.

I have before me a bound volume of six months of *The Century* magazine, from November 1889 to April 1890. *The Century* was then the most popular magazine in America with a printing of 250,000 copies for a nation of 80 million people. It was immensely broad in its subjects and universal in its appeal. If you wanted to read *Huckleberry Finn* along with your friends before it appeared as a book, you had to get your hands on the next issue of *The Century* to find out what was going to happen to Huck after he and Jim took up with the rascals the Duke and the Dauphin. We have nothing like this magazine now.

I turn first to a report from the International Exhibition, an art and science exhibition, of 1889 in Paris. The author is Mariana Griswold van Rensselaer, otherwise known as Mrs. Schuyler van Rensselaer, who would become the first woman admitted to the American Society of Architects and who was one of the leaders in the battle over women's suffrage—one of the leaders of the *opposition*. At the time, France led the world in the fame of her painters and sculptors, fame that was well-deserved, but Americans were taking up the brush and easel too with the power and enthusiasm of youth.

Mrs. Van Rensselaer sums up her impressions in this way:

Here a better foundation has been laid than we see in any other foreign room; here, more than elsewhere, we read a belief that a painter's first task is to learn how to paint. The general level is already good, showing a number of capable painters, well endowed, well trained, and seriously ambitious; a few of exceptional talent and accomplishment, and one, John [Singer] Sargent, who in his own line need fear no living rival. The foundation is well laid, and the prospects for further development seem good, at least in certain directions. Portraiture promises extremely well; *genre* painting only needs to be more national in subject matter to show its strength and individuality better; and landscape gives sure signs of incarnating those very qualities which, in the French school, it threatens to lose: those personal, poetic qualities, which made the glory of the French generation just extinct.

One such passage is a gold mine for those who know what they seek. Mrs. Van Rensselaer expected her readers to care about the arts and to know how to distinguish between the workmanlike and the fine, between the fine and the masterpiece. The painters are all working in a vital tradition. They are not tired old traditionalists, and they are not hacks and frauds who hide their shallow thinking, narrow hearts, and inept hands behind what is ghastly, hideous, incoherent, simplistic, and obscene. She expects American painters to be American, expressing our peculiar national character and showing to the world those scenes that you might only find in the Hudson Valley or in the Shenandoah Mountains. She affirms standards of excellence that transcend time and place.

Gloucester Cathedral, a thousand years old, is more present to her than the latest blundering heap of ecclesiastical sticks and stones is to us.

We may apply to all the arts what she says about Americans who have learned “how to paint.” A thousand techniques, discoveries hard-won and passed down by teacher to pupil over the centuries, have been lost; the bonds of tradition have been severed. I know how true this is of the art I teach and practice, English poetry written in meter. Those who attempt it now are like people who try to chisel marble after a hiatus of generations when no one has done so; they can look at old results, but they have no good idea of how the artist got there. Meanwhile, the people have wandered away. An illiterate peasant going to Mass in a medieval church had a more intimate connection to great art than most graduates of our universities have.

But art is stunted when it wanders from the wellsprings of the divine. So, I turn to another article in my magazine. It is the third installment in a series, “The Nature and Method of Revelation,” by George Park Fisher, an ordained minister, professor at Yale, and a theologian and historian of considerable accomplishment. The article is called, “The Differentiating of Christianity from Judaism.” Again, please remember, this is in the magazine where you are reading *Huckleberry Finn*. Fisher writes as a liberal man of broad education who believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God, the second Person of the Trinity. It is a sensitive issue he must treat. Jesus, says Fisher,

did not decree the subversion of the Jewish cultus, that ancient fabric which had sheltered religious faith in the days of its immaturity, when the community of God was waiting for a full disclosure of the purpose of mercy and of deliverance of the race. He did not by one sudden stroke demolish that system, but he put gunpowder under it. And yet

this is not an apposite simile. We should rather say that he prepared the way for the gradual, intelligent abandonment of it. There might be temporary confusion and even occasional contests; but on the whole the change was to be in a true sense natural, like the melting of the winter snows and the coming out of the leaves and blossoms under the increasing warmth of the vernal sun.

And Fisher goes on, point by point, to show how Jesus, whose teaching was “void of sympathy with Jewish exclusiveness,” fulfilled the law and raised it up to its true spiritual height. Henceforth, he says, “the one condition and source of communion with God was personal communion with him whom God had sent. When this last truth should be fully appreciated, what space would be left for any other priesthood or sacrifice? At the Last Supper he so connected his death with the forgiveness of sins as virtually to dispense with the need of any other offering or intercession than his own.”

What can we say of this? There is no trace of professional jargon. There is no trace of smugness, as if we modern people knew more about God than Jesus did, or more about Jesus than he himself did. The author assumes that his readers are familiar with the entirety of Scripture, the old law, the prophets who prepared the way for Christ, the person and the ministry of Jesus, and the very reason why man engages in religious devotion at all.

When Fisher in quick succession remarks upon the death of Stephen, the preaching of Philip the deacon to the Samaritans, the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, and Peter sitting at the same table with Cornelius the centurion, he need not tell his readers who these people were. We would have to do that now, when ignorance of the faith and of all things older than yesterday is as thick and dark as pitch. Most college students cannot identify the Good Samaritan. I recall a

television newsman calling Easter the day when Christians believe Jesus rose into heaven. Such people are easy prey for stupidities, no doubt, such as that Jesus never said anything about your favorite sin. But their situation is worse than that. They are stunted spiritually. They are made by God to “seek His face,” and in seeking Him to find who they are indeed. But they do not know where to begin to seek. They do not even know that they should seek. They do not know who they are. So, they flail about, catching at anything to be a sorry substitute—sexual identity, for example. They tremble upon the brink of non-being.

The editors of *The Century* assumed that their readers would be interested in Dr. Fisher’s series. I use the word “interest” advisedly: they had a stake in it. Their hearts and minds and souls were on the line. Their eternal destiny hung in the balance. People of our time have a stake in it too, but they do not know about it. The great battle rages about them and bids to sweep them to destruction like seedlings and saplings caught in a flood, but they are blind to lightning and deaf to thunder.

The arts are in shambles—I use that word advisedly too—a butchery, a slaughterhouse. Modernism has slaughtered ten healthy forms of art for every consumptive one it has invented. The churches are in a shambles. My church, the Roman Catholic, has slaughtered ten healthy practices of piety for each that it has invented, and closed ten schools or churches for each that it has built. The Protestant churches have lurched from orthodoxy, to liberalism, to unitarianism, to atheism, or worse, to a sub-pagan cult of Jesus as affirming every mind-paralyzing and life-destroying movement of our time: blessing the murder of children, the emancipation of women from womanhood, and the sowing of the seed of life in a sewer. The flood is upon us, and out comes the rainbow, not the one from God but the silly one from us, declaring that we know better than our creator,

and, if he remembers us, we will deign to accept the gift, but, if not, that’s okay too.

So much for the heights. What about the valleys? What about ordinary human life—the local school, the neighborhood, the family? I hardly need here to cite statistics. The working-class family has been eviscerated. The middle-class family is weak and of no cultural or political influence. Teachers strive to overcome their ignorance by arrogance. They are proud to work *against* the parents, nor do they have any strong connection to the neighborhood, which is mostly silent and empty.

Here too I can refer to my copy of *The Century*. William Chauncy Langdon was the chief promoter of the YMCA in the United States. In “The Problems of Modern Society,” one of a series of articles written by a group of “progressive Christians”—when that was not a contradiction in terms—Langdon warns against depriving the family of its proper fields of activity and against severing Christian churches from a deep and pervasive influence upon every area of social and political life. About marriage, he says that it has degenerated into “a relation to be determined solely by mutual inclination or convenience.” But this is wrong, he says. It violates the laws not only of God, but of nature, “both of which hold in force quite independently of human sanctions, and create a bond beyond the reach and competence of the laws of man to

As the family, so the school.

bind or loose at will.” “Our divorce legislation,” he says, the result of “our superficial ideas of the social and political significance of the family, is the scandal of Christendom.” Imagine what he might say now.

As the family, so the school. You cannot educate in the aggregate, says Langdon. “In the family alone, and by or on the immediate responsibility

of those parents by whom were imposed upon each child from before its birth the physical, mental, and spiritual conditions on which all true after education must be based, can an ideal early education be conducted. If, then, in practice it pass into other hands," he continues, those agents must at all events be "regarded only as the representative deputy or the substitute for the family." In what public school, anywhere in our nation, is that fact recognized? Imagine hiring a plumber who spends his time, not fixing your pipes, but introducing your children to drag queens and instructing them not to tell you about it. What would put your neighbor behind bars for corrupting the morals of a minor is not only done regularly in the schools, but defiantly. The family be damned.

But how can we form strong families unless we raise boys and girls with that end specifically in mind? Here too, Langdon suggests, we have allowed a political idea, that of equality, to crowd out the wisdom of the church and the obvious needs of the family.

It is therefore due to the fact that a purely political conception prevails, to the virtual exclusion of the family idea, that we have largely lost sight of the necessity for discrimination—for so emphasizing the education of the intellect of the boy on the one hand, and that of the intuitions and the moral sense of the girl on the other, as well in their respective highest as in their earliest training, that they shall still be unitedly one, and that "neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord."

It is a sign of the advanced state of our disease that people who call themselves conservative can hardly conceive of what Langdon is talking about and would greet it with suspicion. But if we look about us, we see men with stunted and unfed intellects, and women with stuffed

and overfed moral passions, undirected, unrestrained by the demands of intellectual coherence or downright reality, so that there is nothing so mad, so squalid, and so vicious, that the slack men of our time will not find an excuse for it, and the women will not espouse with sound and fury.

The authors I have cited were progressive, not "for the time," but, in essence, holding high ideals for mankind and looking forward to the continued leavening of the world by the Christian faith, which is itself the truth and which preserves and elevates every measure of truth that the philosophies and the religions of the world have grasped. We fall miles beneath them. I could not assign these articles to undergraduates because they presume a linguistic sophistication, a wealth of general knowledge, and a penetration of thought that our youth could not handle. Professors themselves would be hard put to enter the discussion. Imagine trying to talk about quantum mechanics to aboriginals in the Australian outback who do not have a word for the number five. That expresses the intellectual side of it. On the moral side, it would be like trying to preach about Jesus Christ in a pagan whorehouse.

And yet that is what the apostles and missionaries did. It is our task all over again.

LECTURE TWO

The View from the Basement: Living in a Subhuman Society

Vibrant, hopeful mission begins with compassion. In this session we begin to grasp the price people pay in order to create meaning in a world that has lost touch with virtue.

But to preach Christ in a whorehouse or a shambles, we have to know about those who live and work there. What then is the state of man in these times?

My mind turns to someone who knew that he was living in an age of cultural decline. I mean

Boethius, the greatest scholar of his time, as he awaited a gruesome execution at the hands of the Goths who had assumed lordship over the Roman state in the west. To that man's farsightedness we owe much of what the Middle Ages knew of Greek philosophy. He was both an original thinker and a preserver. The crown of his life's work, which he did not live to achieve, was to show that the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle were in harmony. But he did achieve a great deal. He kept alive in his place and time those very philosophies themselves. And the only reason why he was in prison at all was that he was an old-fashioned Roman. He knew that his duty to his country was more important than his desire to live the rich-but-retired life of a scholar.

He took what we might call the Boethius Option. He worked in the political arena against his inclinations. Someone, after all, had to do it.

So he knew that he lived in bad times. Yet he was not alienated. We see as much when he describes, in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the proudest day of his life, when his two young sons were elected to the consulship on the same day and were led in parade before the cheering crowds. The office of consul, once the most powerful in the state, was now not much more than an honorary title, as Boethius surely knew, yet he could think of consuls going back a thousand years to the days of the first Brutus, the liberator of the Roman people from domination by the more sophisticated Etruscans and their kings. He wrote, as I have said, in a tradition of learning also going back a thousand years, to Socrates and Plato. Those he studied not as an antiquarian. They were really and urgently present to him. His poetry, in the *Consolation*, employs meters that bind him to lyric poets in Greek and Latin but even to the great singers of the epic, Homer and Virgil. Above all stands his Christian faith, his debts to Augustine and other Christian theologians, and his confidence that his life and the lives of all men were in the hands

of a just, all-wise, and almighty Providence, eternal, the self-same, never failing.

Now think of the young man of our time in his cave. He is not exercising the Benedict Option: he is not part of a community of prayer. He is not exercising the Boethius Option; he can hardly conceive of the virtue of piety and the demands it makes upon the good man and citizen. He is

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a mass man, and options have been exercised for him, not by masterminds and overlords, but by the immense weight of a system of social manipulation. He believes in choice and has nothing of any great moment to choose.

Unlike Boethius, he is alienated. Let us consider the ways in which this is so. I often receive letters from young people, more men than women, angry for having been cheated of their heritage of arts and letters. They sense, somehow, that it is not natural for man to be severed from his past. Man is not a dog or a cat that God has made to live in the present moment, without history, without the great tap root of piety that drinks from the springs of what we have been given from our forebears long ago. These young people know, somewhat abstractly but also as a feeling of not being settled, that they are missing something, and they try by what must be artificial means to recover it. They ask for reading lists. They watch some classic movies. They are often unchurched and hardly know where to begin to heal that wound if they begin at all. They are like people who have been shut up indoors all their lives, pallid, weak, stunted, half-smothered in the imagination, who then step outside and see the sun and try a little bit every day to take a walk or turn a spade or sit on a rock somewhere. It is a lot better than nothing.

Most people will not be like that. They will not

know what they do not know. Here someone may say that most people in the past had no great education either and therefore no strong connection to culture. That is not true. All men have had poetry, song, worship, and immemorial traditions; we are the outliers.

I am thinking of a moment here from Richard Llewellyn's autobiographical novel, *How Green Was My Valley*. Two of the lads in the Morgan family, exasperated by the bad treatment the coal miners of Cwm Rhondda have received from the owners, are leaving their home and village forever to emigrate to South America. "Father," they say, "may we have a chapter?" And the father, Gwilym Morgan, reaches for the family Bible, and he chooses the twenty-third psalm, which he reads slowly with deep sorrow and resignation. Think of that moment. Think of the meaning of it, of how everyone in that little thatched cottage knew that they lived in a world of profound significance; how they could think of their exile as like that of the Jews after Jerusalem had been razed by the Babylonian armies; how they could yet trust that wherever they went, the God of their fathers would be with them. In fact, the Welsh in those days remained Welshmen wherever they went, whether to the Welsh-speaking colony deep in the interior of Argentina or to the coal mining towns of Pennsylvania where I grew up. They spoke and sang and prayed in *yr heniaith*, the *old tongue*. So it was with German and Swedish Lutherans. So it was with French and Italian Catholics. They had cultural *homes*, thousands of miles away from where they were born, and they had them though they had hardly gone to school at all. But the modern man in his cave, the mass man, has no such home, even if he has graduated from college and still lives in the basement of his parents' house.

But how can we expect that he will be rooted in culture when he does not feel himself to be rooted in his own body? Think of what alienation must already have occurred for people

to believe that their very bodies are "wrong." My colleague at *Touchstone Magazine*, Robert George, has called the philosophical position "self-body dualism," as if the self, floating in the air somewhere, in a frail and ever-threatened imaginative space, felt the body as something alien to it, an accident, a thing to be used or to be transmogrified to attain the self's desires. The very possibility of saying "I have the wrong body" would not have occurred to anyone before our time and place. It would not have occurred to young Huw Morgan in the novel to which I have alluded. His boyhood was affirmed at every pass, every hour of the day, by his father and his big brothers, but also by his mother and his sister, who needed him to grow up to be a man and who saw to it that he did so. How do you know you are a boy? You are chopping wood alongside your father, and your muscles are growing as strong as cables even before the miracle of puberty. How do you know you are a girl? You are baking bread alongside your mother, and you will have memories in your arms, hands, and fingers of what it means to feed hungry people, from the toddler tugging at your skirt to the great exhausted man coming in from the field. How do you know that boys and girls are meant for one another? You know it as you know that fresh air is good and the sky is blue.

We are, as Walker Percy said, "lost in the cosmos," as if we ourselves were the aliens that so many godless scientists have hoped to meet. Think of what it means to be lost in a cosmos. It requires no explanation to be lost in *chaos*: what can you be but lost, where there is no stable place to dwell in, no objects that endure from moment to moment, no law but lawlessness, and no personality? But to be lost in a cosmos? We dwell in a cosmos of astonishing beauty, but we do not see it. We must not see it, otherwise we would be eager to reflect it in our art, but our art celebrates the ugly, the transgressive, the willful, the lawless. We must not see it because

we do not see the cosmos that is as near to us as our flesh and blood: we do not see it in our bodies. If you are lost in a cosmos, it can only mean that you yourself are out of kilter, disordered, chaotic.

Consider the vast intergalactic loneliness of our time. I have called our shift in sexual mores “the Lonely Revolution,” because it has brought us not harmony and understanding but alienation. It could have done no other. Fornication, with no end beyond the pleasure of the act, and sometimes not much pleasure but a reprieve from loneliness, or a chance to sweat off your anxieties, is essentially alienating. The man and woman do not unite fully as man and woman. They suppress the full knowledge of what they are doing. You must remind them that it is the child-making thing and that a woman can become pregnant only by means of someone’s voluntary action, her own action, unless she is raped. The act has no meaning beyond itself; it has not even the innocence of dogs in the natural throes of reproductive urgency. Divorce

No one is home because no one is home.

undoes the wisdom of Solomon. Mother and father agree to slice the child in half, so as to pretend they can leave their marriage as persons whole and entire. Pornography: what is it but so often the dank and dark hole where lonely men, men who cannot find a woman, will submerge themselves in artificial excitations, like heroin, less and less effective with every dose?

I could go further. No one is home because *no one is home*. The house is, at best, the family’s haven from the outer world, that is, a world of mass men, where no one knows anyone else, where there are more cars on the street than children, and where young people grow up without the powerful memory of endless summer days when they played outdoors until

they dropped with kids they liked and kids they hated, but, in any case, with them and not alone—memories almost as strong as those we should have from the family table and the parlor, and the bedroom shared with a brother or sister, and conversations that could go long into the night.

And further, as far as heaven. Let us think about these two verses from Scripture: “It is not good for the man to be alone,” and “Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy.” When the Lord God considers Adam, he sees his beloved creature as incomplete even though the man has just exercised a godlike authority in naming the beasts. That God whom we worship as three Persons is not alone; he is essentially and not by decision or by accident in relationship. Adam cannot bear the image of God unless he too is bound in relationship with a help who is meet for him. God made the light and beheld it as an artist beholds his work, and he declared it good. That the man should be alone, that is the first thing in Scripture that is *lo tov*, not good. Suppose we accept what even the pagans must have seen: man and woman belong together, and the family is the cradle of all human society and, to some extent, also the end for which we have politicians and laws and armies, that there should be thriving families everywhere. Is that all? Will man be relieved of his loneliness if he has a family and children? Is there no more?

Made as we are in the image of God, we are made also *for God*, for participation in that life of eternal love which is the Trinity. And again, even the pagans have understood something of this. Josef Pieper rightly said that, as a point of fact, there is no such thing as a feast without the gods. No matter how dim the memory may be, a feast to which the gods are not invited, or in which the gods are not invoked or praised, is quite simply an anthropological absurdity. We are united from above. Consider how the bonds of family life itself grow frayed and fragile over time, without the strength of religion, of

the duty that we acknowledge to God. It is a good thing to remember playing ball with your brother. It is a good altogether of another dimension to remember singing a hymn with your brother. A people who do not, in some fashion, come together in worship will soon not come together at all. When they lose the sense of belonging to God, they will lose, in turn, the sense of belonging to one another. There can be no brotherhood of man without the fatherhood of God. For a while, in some people, a loss of religious faith will be compensated by vigorous social action. But it is ultimately empty. It does not soothe the heart. It is a bandage laid over a Grand Canyon. When the inevitable frustrations and failures come, such people collapse into political actors with a vengeance. No one hates as bitterly as does the philanthropist.

C. S. Lewis once imagined a race of semi-rational creatures: monopods, hopping about on one foot. These monopods could not imagine that there were creatures walking on two feet. They would rather deny the evidence of their senses than admit the possibility. Such is our modern man. He is lonely, but he has grown habituated to it and cannot imagine what a real society might look like. The basement is comforting because it is dim. He is faithless, but he has grown habituated to it and cannot imagine what it would be to praise God from a full and joyful heart. Singing is strenuous. He has no hope in this world or the next, nor does he understand what the word means. Hope is for man on the field of battle, and battle means danger. He has no culture to which we might appeal and from whose nourishing roots we might work. He has been told all his life that beauty does not exist, and he seems determined to make that denial a reality. He has no strong connection to the natural world around him. But he is still made by God, for God, made for the love of God and neighbor, made for genuine love. What do we do with this alienated man?

LECTURE THREE

Recapturing the Vision: Building an Inhabitable World

Rather than grieving the loss of its past, the challenge before each succeeding generation of Christians is to embrace the unique opportunities of the future. In this session, we identify the building blocks for constructing outposts of order in a chaotic world.

You cannot give what you do not have. One alienated man cannot save another. One drowning man pulls the other drowning man down. So we must certainly regard the wisdom and the practice of Saint Benedict. We must have, by intention, communities of prayer, of healthy family life, and of what is now called classical learning. We may reform some long-

The imagination is the driver of man.

established schools and colleges and social organizations here and there as the case may admit of it. Sometimes the limb can be saved. Sometimes it is full of gangrene and must be cut off, the sooner the better. But it is urgent that Christians build, always build, new schools especially; perhaps new beneficent societies to aid the poor, the sick, and the dying; new groups where boys can learn to be men, under the tutelage of true men and not effeminate predators. Read real books. They have never been cheaper and easier to obtain. Build the imagination. The imagination is the driver of man. Do not think that good catechesis can make up for the deficiency. We have the classics of literature and even the golden age of Hollywood on our side. We have allies with names like Dickens, Hawthorne, Milton, Goethe, Shakespeare, Homer, and Tolstoy, and more recent allies with names like John Ford, William Wyler, Alfred Hitchcock, Frank Capra,

Elia Kazan, and Howard Hawkes. By all means, enlist them.

We must above all build families. No longer may we simply expect them to occur as naturally and inevitably as the sun rises. All the traditions of courtship and even of the recent thing called “dating” have been forgotten. To say to a young man, even one of good will, “You should go mingle with the girls and ask one of them on a date,” is like handing a wrench or a blow torch to a boy with soft hands and saying, “Go fix the pipes.” He can neither obey nor disobey. He does not know where to begin. He may not know what the command means. Divorce is a scandal of our time, but un-marriage may be even worse. It is not good to be alone. If we do not arrange marriages, we may yet arrange dances, socials, and dates, and, in the meantime, raise boys and girls with the clear expectation to marry and to think of most of what they do in school as a preparation for marriage. The home and not the place of employment is where the heart must lie if it is to beat warmly.

We must build, always build. We must build the arts. Do you sing trash in your churches? There is no reason for it. Stupidity and ugliness are vices, and they do not please the Lord. Abel was careful, but Cain was slovenly. You cannot play a musical instrument? That is not true. There is one instrument we can all play, an instrument of extraordinary power, poignancy, and beauty. It is called the human voice. But learn to play the strings or the keys. If you have a talent for it, learn to paint, learn to write real English verse, learn to turn marble into the body and the living breath of man. Do not expect greatness. We are working in a bad time. Expect goodness. Demand fidelity. Be humble enough to admit that we have more to recover than we can begin to name.

Then there is the Boethius Option, that of combining the hard work of preservation, and perhaps enhancement of learning, with the foul and noisome work of politics, working

with a few good people but also with many traitors, trimmers, grifters, demagogues, egotists, and fools. Boethius worked with and against murderous Goths who were not pagans but Arian Christians. We must work with and against the addled and the vicious. We must do so because we love our country and because we want to pull as many people out of the quicksand as we can. We must also do so—I have been compelled to confess—because our political enemies will not stop until even such small intentional communities and organizations I have described are crushed or are so slandered and vilified that mere association with them would make it impossible for you to become a doctor, a lawyer, a college professor, an actor with work, a basketball player, or a man digging ditches for the county. And I am afraid, too, that the sheer massiveness of state and corporate power, though unexercised in action against any specific person, will draw many weak souls toward the madness of the time because it is hard to be a flower against a skyscraper. I say this as someone who is wholly disinclined to such work.

But neither Benedict nor Boethius will do much for men already alienated. I must recommend another line of attack. I shall call it the Bosco Option, for Saint John Bosco, who ministered to the street boys of nineteenth-century Turin and who built schools and founded a whole order of teachers, the Salesians.

John Bosco combined kindness with absolute cleanness of life and a real shrewdness about the boys he wanted to save, shrewdness as to what they were by nature, what their evil habits were, where they were going wrong, and what they needed to heal them and make them strong men. The first point is that he went among them in the streets. He appealed directly to their boyish natures. He was an athlete and acrobat who performed tricks of dexterity for them on a wire strung out between two posts. He performed “magic.” He fed them and gave them

whatever he could manage for a warm roof over their heads. He taught them, never holding back the truth, but taught them straightforwardly and confidently. He loved them.

Love—I am talking here about the feeling and the motive for action—without knowledge can do more harm than good. If you are sick, you want someone who knows what is wrong with you, not someone who has no notion of disease but who is eager to help by giving you the latest

*We have people now
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oil and alcohol concoction from the traveling huckster. But if you are sick in the soul, someone who knows what is wrong with you but does not love you will do you no good. He too may do real harm if you come to associate his diagnosis with his indifference or contempt. We here must be like John Bosco to the boys. We must love them, and we must be clear about the fact of their profound alienation, as to its causes, its character, and its prognosis.

“Which man among you,” says Jesus, “if his son should ask him for an egg, would give him a scorpion?” We have people now without fathers to ask for anything and people who demand scorpions instead of eggs. They do so partly from perversity, but mainly from ignorance, and alienation, and despair. Pope Francis has called the Church a “field hospital.” He is right about that, though whether he himself knows the diseases and has the remedies for them is another question. We should know the diseases, and, on a human level, we should have ready the remedies. The son is asking for an egg, not a scorpion, but also not the bread from heaven—not yet, at least.

On the streets of this new and terrible Turin, polished without but full of corruption and dead men’s bones within, we will meet young men who have never had a close male friend in their lives. That is a new thing in the world and profoundly sad. Some of these men will turn toward other men in a sexual way to relieve the alienation. Others will not but will shy away from friendship for fear of it being misunderstood or made the object of scorn. That is a wound to heal, and John Bosco must see to it. He knows what the sufferer does not know. He knows that male friendship is an ordinary and natural thing. He knows as a matter of fact that every civilization in the world has been built upon the bonds of male friendship: that of the team, the platoon, the work crew, the men aboard ship, the hunters and fishermen, the lumbermen, the linemen, the drovers, the guildsmen, even the guilds of professors. And he will remember that Jesus himself in his humanity called roundabout him a band of brothers, the apostles, to be his ambassadors to the world, putting their lives at risk, baptizing all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

In the streets of this new Turin, he will meet people who have never read a good book in all their lives and who have no poetry or long-loved folk songs by heart. They are alienated from culture itself. They can decipher words on a page. It would perhaps be easier to heal them if they could not do that because they believe, inaccurately, that they know how to read. We must teach them to read. That will not be easy. Children like to read because reading opens up the universe to them. Our street people believe they know all there is to know about the world already; they are like people who believe they know the stars because they once saw them reflected in a puddle. But slowly, patiently, we must teach them to read good things. Perhaps the first step will be to get them to watch a good movie, artfully crafted and true, good for the soul of man. Always keep in mind that they

do not know what they do not know but that they think they know a great deal. They will therefore hesitate before the Book of books, the Bible. They will believe they know what is in it, but they will be afraid of it. *It should strike them as strange because it should strike us as strange.* We do not call for a familiarity that ends in indifference. Great works of human

Alienated people build up an alien city.

thought and art seem to hurl the earth out from under our feet; so should a real encounter with the Bible do, ten times over. “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” I believe it, and I rejoice in it. Far be it from me to say that I comprehend it. The creature cannot comprehend the Creator, and it is a joy to the creature to know it.

In the streets of this Turin of steel and glass, he sees people hurrying off to work, and the work they do seems to have as its great result only a city of steel and glass. Alienated people build up an alien city. We speak much about community, but where is it to be found? In cubicles? Why do we work? The alienated man does not know why. We work, he thinks, because otherwise we are worthless. We work for money, and money is for the pursuit of one’s pleasure. Many a commentator has compared modern man, nameless and faceless, swept by the millions into their places of work and then swept by the millions back to the places where they sleep, as like ants in an anthill. That is unfair to ants. They do what they do by the nature God gave them. Kick the anthill, and they will scurry about till they build it again. Why do we build what we build? And why, with our vast wealth, do we build things that are ugly or that express a strange vindictive desire to obliterate man himself? We must then bring to this alienated man the nourishing reality of leisure. Not vacant

time, not the vacation—he has enough of those; he is vacuous enough already. I mean the leisure that partakes of the feast.

For when has this street person, this jacketed and tied up white-collar laborer at steel and glass, known a feast? Large parties, sure, and debauches, sure, unless his very loneliness has protected him from debauchery. But a feast? Every French peasant hoeing potatoes knew what it was to celebrate a feast. The church bells ringing the Angelus every day would remind him of it. Every Russian serf cutting the barley with his sickle knew what it was to celebrate a feast. The little ikon on his shelf at home would remind him of it. Our alienated man does not know it. We must then bring the feast his way. And the feast implies the presence of the divine.

That does not mean that we hang a flag outside of our church, vainly declaring that “all are welcome.” No more than self-congratulation, that. It means we take the mystery and the joy of the feast into his streets. Our enemies will not use the phrase “freedom of religion” but only “freedom of worship.” They fear that freedom of religion will be too public a thing. Then let freedom of worship be a public thing. Bring it forth; bring it outdoors. It will make people uncomfortable. Well, let them be made uncomfortable; all truly great things make us uncomfortable. It is not a comfortable thing to gaze upon the vast cycle of paintings with which Michelangelo covered the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. It is not comfortable to listen to Bach’s “Passion according to Saint Matthew.” True love is beyond comfort, as are true sorrow and true joy. Does it ever occur to us that, outside of our congregations, and, for Roman Catholics, even within our congregations, most people alive have never heard a group of their neighbors singing from a full heart, singing about what stirs them to the core of their beings? Again, it is an experience that human beings have always known until our time. Never to have had it, why, would be like never having beheld a sunrise or

water rushing in a stream.

In this new Turin, no one is home. I am not the first to say it. Romano Guardini said it when he noted that modern man—whom he dates from the end of the Renaissance—had slowly lost the sense that the world, the cosmos, was a haven

Our task is to bring man home.

for man, even the Christian cosmos that had torn the firmament in two from top to bottom, when Christ our life was made flesh to dwell among us, and, when he rose triumphant, to prepare a place for us with him. Man has not been made humble by the accomplishments of modern science. He has been made proud, and he has been humiliated; the two go together. Gabriel Marcel said it when he wrote against the “mass man,” suffering the techniques of mass manipulation and degradation, the techniques

of advertising and mass politics. Our task is to bring man home. Every man we meet is an orphan. We too are orphans. We too are lost, and, if we relied upon our own intelligence and strength of will, we would achieve nothing. But we have one who has gone before us to mark the way. He is not John Bosco. *He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.* He does not merely give us the answers we seek. He is not a sage or a guru. *He is the answer we seek.* His cross is the span above the abyss. Ultimately, we and the lost souls we wish to help must meet that cross. Let us do so with good cheer and bold faith. There is no alternative.



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