

ISSN 3049-8678

# Radiance

LIGHT SHINING IN THE DARKNESS  
(John 1:5)

UN-REPRESS  
YOUR DEATH

OUR HUNGER  
FOR THE SACRED

AN END TO  
LONELINESS

TRUE  
COMPASSION

SPIRITUALITY  
AND SEX

THE HOLINESS  
OF LAUGHTER

## THE GIRL WHO DEFEATED AN EMPIRE

VOL. 1, 2024





**“THIS IS FROM WHEN PEOPLE WERE DUMB,”** Beavis tells Butthead, befuddled by the 1950’s feel of a driver’s ed movie they were forced to watch at school. His explanation blithely reveals the parochialism of the present. Why do we imagine that our own time is the only one that has it all figured out? What if Catholic Christianity can give you a higher standpoint from which to see a larger truth – one that transcends the biases of the present day and this particular corner of the world? If you find the Catholic way both attractive and off-putting, this magazine was made for you. What if there’s more to it than you think? What if some of its obstacles have hidden doorways? And if you’re a Catholic seeking a deeper understanding of what your faith means in the present world, this magazine is also for you. Because the journey of understanding begins, not ends, with conversion.

— Richard Wise

# RADIANCE

Published quarterly for searching minds and Catholic enquirers

# CONTENTS

The Girl Who Defeated an Empire	4
Un-Repress Your Death	6
Our Hunger for the Sacred	12
An End to Loneliness	16
True Compassion	20
The Tragedy of Performative Respect	24
Why Doing Good Should be Kept Secret	28
Spirituality and Sex	30
The Holiness of a Good Laugh	34

Spiritual Director: Fr Chris Vipers

Editor: Richard Wise

Design: Richard Peacock

Contributors: Richard Wise, Harry Cooper

Free subscription to Radiance at [radiancemagazine.co.uk](http://radiancemagazine.co.uk)

Printed in the UK on renewable EU Ecolabel and FSC certified virgin fibre

**VOLUME 1, 2024**

[radiancemagazine.co.uk](http://radiancemagazine.co.uk)

*The 3rd Century teen rebel still rocking our world*

# THE GIRL WHO DEFEATED AN EMPIRE

**TEENAGE GIRLS ARE SO ANNOYING, PARTICULARLY THE CHRISTIAN ONES. THEY NEVER KNOW THEIR PLACE.**

Just ask Dacian, the third century Roman prefect in Gallia Aquitania (southwestern France).

In order to benefit from the considerable privileges of being a Roman citizen – border security, clean water, safe roads – all you had to do was participate in a sacred ceremony where you made an oath of allegiance and put a pinch of incense in the bowl before Diana in her temple. The Romans considered themselves broadminded as they let you keep your original religion but expected you to make this small concession to the Empire's official religion.

In the city of Agen, Dacian had this very annoying 12-year-old girl named Faith. She was from a respected family, dignified and mannerly. But it shocked her that a Christian would be asked to publicly recognize any other God.

She refused to do so - and word got out. Dacian tried to convince her, using flattery first then the threat of death. Nothing worked. Rageful, Dacian sentenced her to an excruciating death.

The Roman Empire made a point of public displays of brutality towards those who challenged its order. They maintained this practice for centuries for the simple reason that it was effective. You didn't want to mess with Rome once you had witnessed the



12-century painting on parchment of Saint Faith holding a palm symbolizing her martyrdom and the instrument of her death, a brasier.

grisly consequences of doing so.

Some people went to the execution just to enjoy the prurient horror of its spectacle; but others went to pray for her.

Many Christians fled Agen rather than face execution but as the impact of Faith's courage haunted them, some returned and would die the same way. Legend has it that some of the Roman soldiers marveled at her faith, converted and were in turn executed themselves.

A cult of veneration grew and many miracles – particularly of prisoners being released from their chains – were attributed to Saint Faith.

The Roman Empire eventually waned and collapsed. But the veneration of Saint Faith lived on.

Her relics were relocated – actually stolen – by a Benedictine monk from Agen to Conques in the 9th Century. Conques was home to a small abbey located on the pilgrimage trail from Le Puy to Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

A magnificent Romanesque abbey church was built to hold her precious relics.

Though Conques has a population of only 300, it attracts more than 300,000 visitors a year – all of whom are reminded of how the inspiring courage of one teenage girl defeated her barbaric execution by the Roman Empire. Conques is a shining stop on the Via Podiensis trail that carries Camino Santiago pilgrims and hikers from Le Puy en Velay to Saint Jean Pied de Port in the French foothills of the Pyrenees.

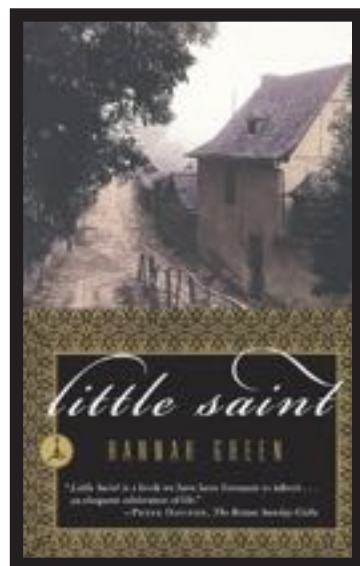
Saint Faith's story is a testament to the extraordinary power of steadfast faith and unyielding courage.

This young girl, who stood resolute against the formidable Roman Empire, embodies the spirit of unwavering devotion and the triumph of the human spirit over tyranny.

Her legacy, immortalized in the beautiful relics housed in the abbey church of Conques, continues to inspire countless pilgrims and visitors.

She reminds us that true strength lies not in physical might, but in the conviction of one's beliefs and the courage to stand by them, even in the face of certain death.

Saint Faith's life and legacy teach us that even the smallest voice can resonate through the ages, defeating empires and igniting the flames of faith in hearts across the world. ♦



Hannah Green wrote a marvelous book about Saint Faith and the village of Conques called *Little Saint*. It tells the story of how the relics of Saint Faith attracted gifts of gold and jewels from all over France making her reliquary one of the most beautiful artistic creations of the Dark Ages.





*Why the millionaire transfused his son's blood*

# UN-REPRESS YOUR DEATH

**IT MAY NOT BE IMMEDIATELY OBVIOUS WHAT CONNECTS BRYAN JOHNSON'S IMMORTALITY PROJECT TO THE FRAYING OF THE MODERN WORLD'S MENTAL HEALTH.**

For about six months, Johnson — a 46-year-old American worth \$400 million — harvested a litre of his teenage son's blood and had it pumped into his body once a week. He did this in the hope it would stop his body from ageing, one of an array of interventions he has tried in his bid to destroy death and obtain eternal life. But his son's blood failed to make any discernible difference to his body.

He began his project in 2021, around a decade after statistics indicated the beginning of a stark rise in rates of depression and other forms of mental sickness across the developed world. People, especially those born after 1985, are reporting higher rates of depression, misery and anxiety than ever before. Theories abound that seek to explain this seemingly unprecedented phenomenon: are people unhappier due to a collapse in religious faith? Low levels of economic growth? Or — the current *bête noire* — the inventions of smartphones and social media? There is no doubt some truth in all these theories, but somehow none seem to hit the mark convincingly.

Perhaps, though, there is something that explains this many-headed hydra. And perhaps Johnson's refusal to accept his mortality — and the fascination with which so many are tracking his efforts — points to what might be going on.

**“Keep death daily before you.”**

**— Saint Benedict**



In 1974, a psychoanalyst named Ernest Becker died from colon cancer at the age of 49. Two months later, his masterpiece, *The Denial of Death* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction. In it, he seeks to show that the driving motive in human existence is the terror of death, the inescapable condition of being a self-aware “I” whilst remaining enfleshed in a material body subject to decay and decline. As Becker devastatingly puts it:

“Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order to blindly and dumbly rot and disappear forever.”

To cope with this horror, an individual must repress this awareness of his death, something that takes place early on as a child enters the world and the culture in which he lives. To function effectively in society, whilst maintaining this repression, the individual must be given a way to live out his heroic mission to self-actualise, grow and triumph. But this mission remains fundamentally an illusion, built on the need to avoid realising the horror of his mortal condition.

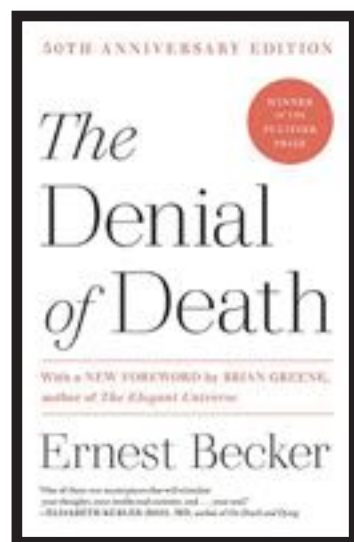
Until quite recently, Becker argues, an individual’s purpose in life could be fulfilled by subscribing to socially recognised heroic missions and symbolic systems, for example by belonging to a religious community, defending his country from invasion or spreading revolution around the world. Each offered a means by which the individual could transcend the limitations of flesh and bone by entering into a story that would continue after death. As a sceptical atheist, he described them as illusions, but absolutely necessary for a human being to function without suffering total mental collapse. For this reason, Becker described them as “healthy repressions.”

However, these old frameworks have been swept away, and what’s left is breaking down. This is a process that began long ago and is only now reaching its apotheosis.

In the 18th century, the Enlightenment thinkers took sledgehammers to the old modes of thinking and believing, placing the individual at the centre of the universe. The objective truth that underpinned and anchored individual human existence has been gradually but inexorably replaced by “my subjective truth.”

Meanwhile scientists have declared that there is no meaning to a rose or a star cluster — stripping the universe and nature of magic, transcendence and mystery.

With the erosion of the narratives into which the individual had embedded himself for millennia - religious, national, cultural or political - the modern individual is now left alone to prove his value to his unknown neighbour through performing on TikTok, Twitter and OnlyFans. Little wonder the modern world is sinking into medicated misery. And little wonder that so many of us are looking to the priests of this new, shallow, meaningless religion of self-enhancement and self-promotion. Bryan Johnson’s immortality project is in



Ernest Becker’s *Denial of Death* is a profoundly eye-opening book that delves into the depths of human psychology, exploring the existential fear of mortality that shapes our behavior and culture. Becker masterfully intertwines psychological theory, philosophy, and cultural analysis to reveal how our unconscious denial of death drives much of our anxiety, creativity, and even societal structures.

fact just a narcissistic youth-preservation project, motivated by the same terror we all share.

As Becker puts it:

[Man] accepts the cultural programming that turns his nose where he is supposed to look; he doesn't bite the world off in one piece as a giant would, but in small manageable pieces, as a beaver does. He uses all kinds of techniques, which we call the "character defences": he learns not to expose himself, not to stand out; he learns to embed himself in other-power... the result is that he comes to exist in the imagined infallibility of the world around him. He doesn't have to have fears when his feet are solidly mired and his life mapped out in a ready-made maze."

The problem, however, is that beneath the stable, shiny veneer of a man-made life, we cannot escape the fact that we are going to die. And it is when this veneer is cracked that we start to unravel. "As soon as a man lifts his nose from the ground," says Becker, "and starts sniffing at eternal problems like life and death, the meaning of a rose or a star cluster - then he is in trouble."

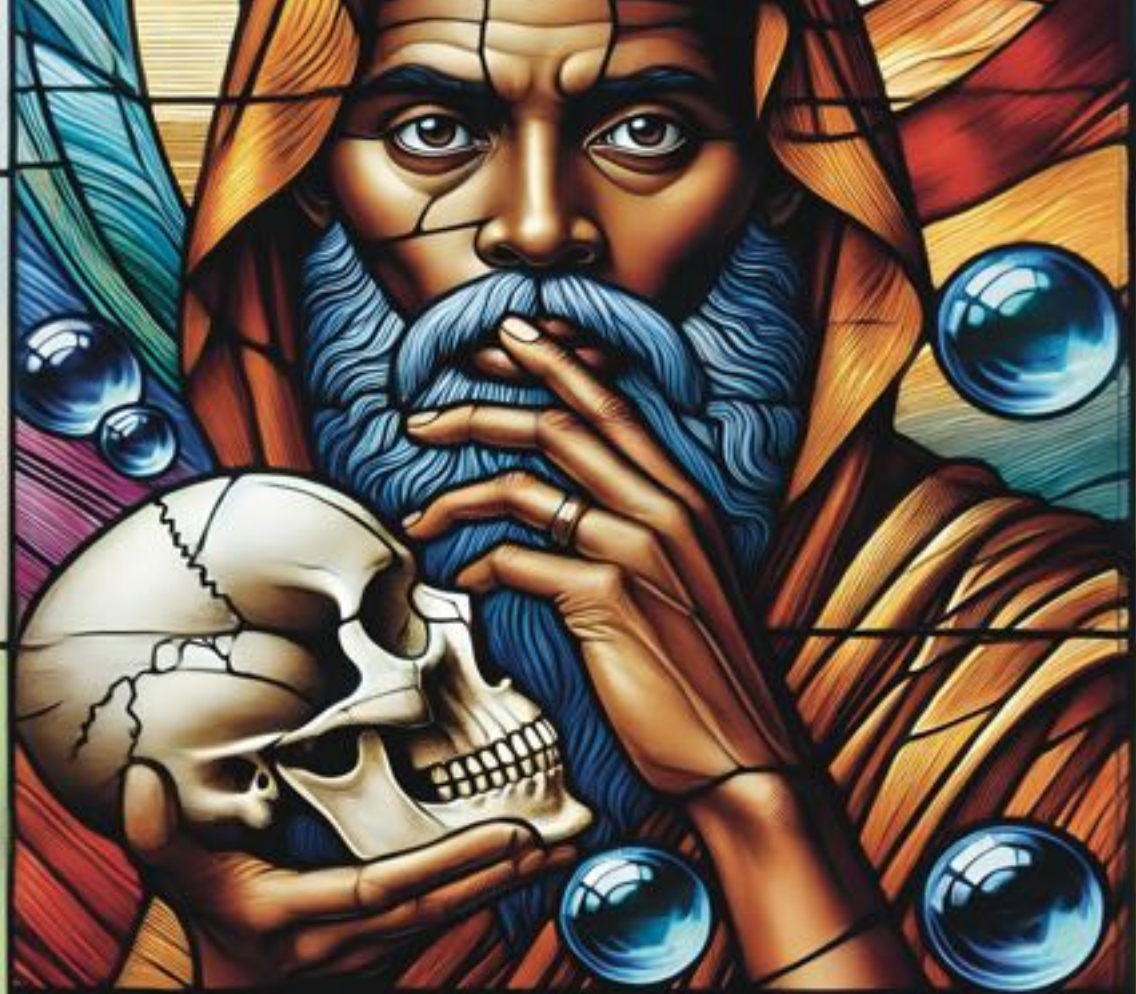
For Becker, mental illness is in fact a sign of the failure of these illusions to keep the reality of death repressed. A depressed or psychotic person is simply someone who has seen through the lies of the society or culture in which they lived, which is why we consent to drugging and imprisoning them, to protect the lie from being discovered.

But what do you do when a whole society becomes depressed? When psychosis seems to be spreading throughout the body politic, the cultural world, the intellectual space? Consider the events of the last few years and then consider the possibility that we are as a species collectively becoming aware of the terror of the death that we thought we had successfully repressed.

In recent years, it has become common to describe oneself as "spiritual, not religious" or agnostic, rather atheist. There's also been a renewed interest in the esoteric, in the activities of angels, in the mystical practices of eastern spiritual traditions. Becker wouldn't be surprised: although he died before the full force of materialistic secularism had been felt, it was already clear to him that modern ideologies were failing to provide us with a way to function in the face of our inevitable deaths.

The human thirst for meaning will not be sated so long as it remains a solitary pursuit since it is the fact of his solitariness that makes his finite life so painful to bear. Rather, the thirst can only be fully sated when it occurs with others who are seeking the same thing. Whether that thing is called enlightenment, nirvana or eternal life is not important: what does matter is the anchoring of the spiritual quest in a community who share the same goals and practices. This is what is meant by religion.

For 1,500 years in the West, that community was called the



Catholic Church and, although it fractured in the 16th century, it remains the same community it was in 33 AD when it came into being. Indeed, the word “catholic” stems from the ancient Greek word “universal” and implies a universality that transcends both time and space. The original word for church, ‘ekklesia’, originates in the words “to call” and “out of,” indicating a gathering of people who have been summoned to a place by something higher.

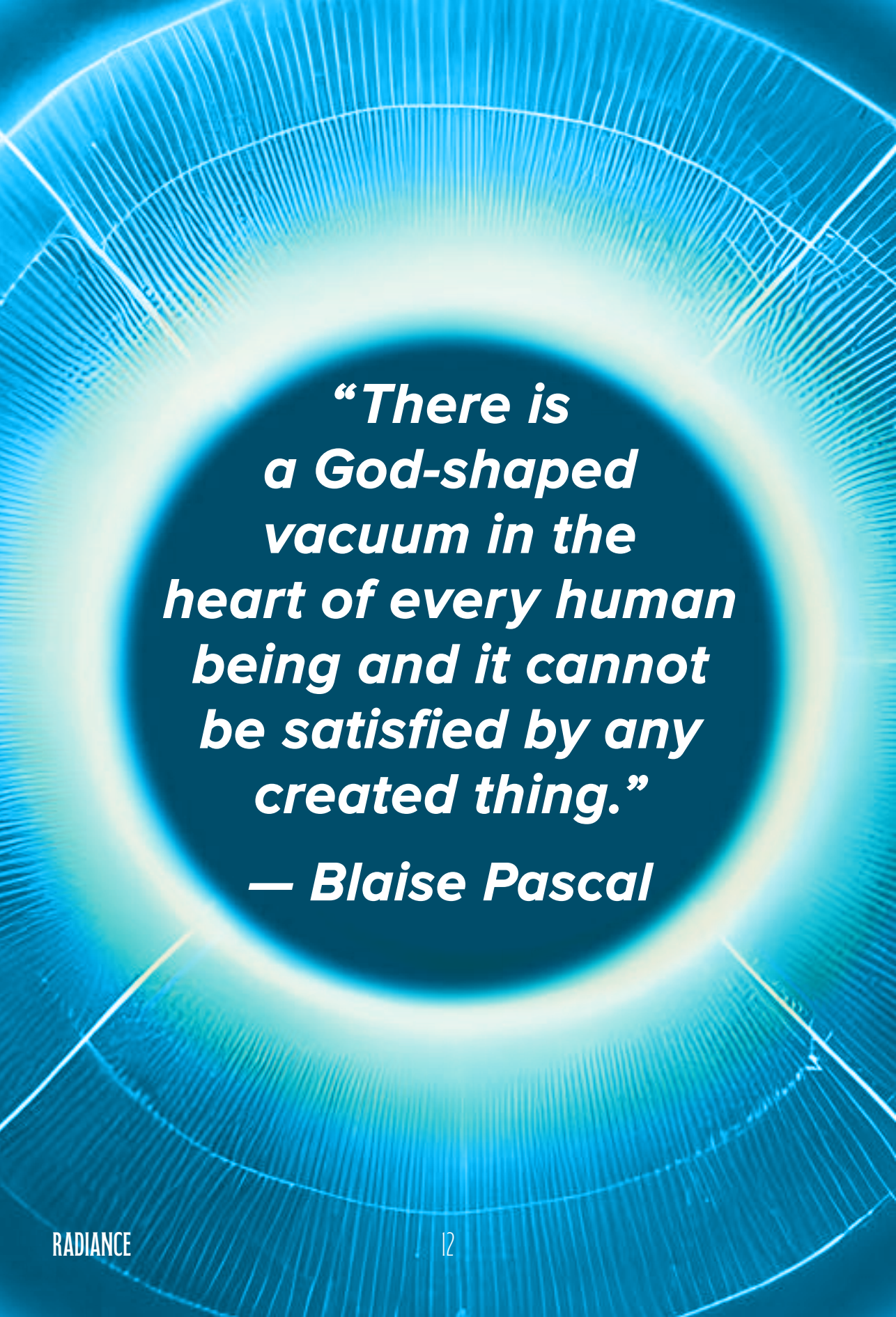
Catholics believe that they — both those alive and those dead — are bound together in a community that transcends time and space, and by a belief that physical death is not the end of human existence. When Christ is described as conquering death, or liberating us from the sin of the flesh, these words are not understood simply as a nice, reassuring bit of poetic language but as a genuine offer of a form of life that continues after physical death, a form of life very different to the one which we are currently living, but life

nonetheless. From this conviction — that we continue in some way after physical death — comes a great peace and serenity.

And whilst many argue that we have outgrown communities anchored in religious narratives, in particular those like the Catholic Church, Bryan Johnson’s immortality project indicates otherwise. Our societal obsession with youth and beauty is matched only by our refusal to acknowledge our death - and our ingrained need for a heroic mission and symbolic systems is everywhere refracted through this lens.

Perhaps now is the time to reconsider the ancient wisdom that the modern world has deemed no longer relevant. “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field,” wrote the prophet Isaiah 3,000 years ago. “The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows upon it... but the word of our God will stand forever.” ♦





***“There is  
a God-shaped  
vacuum in the  
heart of every human  
being and it cannot  
be satisfied by any  
created thing.”  
— Blaise Pascal***

*Why deny your own humanity?*

# OUR HUNGER FOR THE SACRED

**IMAGINE IF EVERYONE THOUGHT FRUIT WAS POISONOUS. WE'D SURVIVE BUT WE'D NEVER KNOW THE FEELING OF A RIPE PEACH BURSTING WITH FLAVOUR, THE CRISP COOLNESS OF WATER-MELON, THE SWEET YIELDING FLESH OF A STRAWBERRY.**

Or imagine if all human procreation was performed without sex.

It is one thing to voluntarily give up fruit or sex. But it's wholly another to not even know what they're like.

People who say they're not religious are often having all kinds of sacred experiences; they just don't call them that.

You're watching a David Attenborough documentary because it's beautiful, and you're concerned about the damage our species is doing to our complicated and fragile world. As the haunting cry of the whales makes you cry, is it possible you are having an experience of the sacred?

To wander in an ancient wood at twilight, is this not to know the sacred? Was not all of Harry Potter an experience of the sacred for its fans? Are not art-house horror movies a shudder of the sacred? Are not Guillermo del Toro and Neil Gaiman catering to our unmet needs for the sacred?

The unexamined hostility to religion which pervaded an earlier generation of anthropologists is giving way to a more sympathetic and nuanced understanding of religion and the role that it plays in



the human imagination. This is the story that emerges from Timothy Larsen's masterful study *The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith*. "The slain God" was an expression popularized by Victorian anthropologist James Frazier who pointed to this recurrent motif in many ancient religions seeking implicitly to debunk Christianity. Contrasting with Frazier are husband and wife anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner who were world experts on the Ndembu people of Zambia. In their later years they converted to Catholicism and elucidated the nature of play, ritual, theatre and liminality in culture around the world.

The thing about every religion is that it demands you look at life through its lens. There is not a single vibrant religion that says, "Hey, it's all good; feel free to combine us with any other symbolic systems you like."

Imagine if you told your romantic partner, "I love you – just like I love everybody." That's not going to fly. They want you to choose *them*, to be true to them and their specific and unique nature.

Religion, like romance, requires commitment. The word religion, after all, has the same root as ligament – a tie, a binding that connects. You connect to the sacred through religion and you do so in a tied-together community.

So, if your soul hungers for the sacred as your body does for food, why starve it? Why not do the same as you would with food, and not just eat anything, but hold out for the best, the highest quality, naturally grown, bursting with flavour?

And what if the answer is right in your own backyard? What if you actually don't need to fly to India to find it?

It's hidden in plain sight.

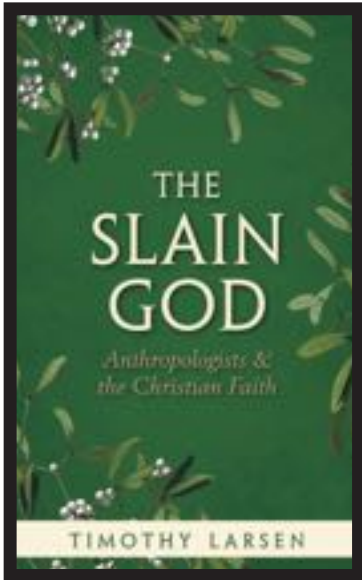
It's Catholicism.

A little bit of exploration and you will uncover some of its great treasures:

- ❖ Sacred music from Gregorian Chant to Renaissance polyphony to Mozart's Requiem to Rutter's *The Lord is My Shepherd*.
- ❖ Cathedrals. Not just relics of the past, they are continuously coming back to life and even burst forth brand new like Gaudi's Sagrada Familia, one of the most extraordinary structures of the modern world.
- ❖ Centuries of some of the world's great paintings.
- ❖ Some of the longest lasting charitable organizations in the world.
- ❖ The progenitor of the modern university and its tradition of open inquiry and free thinking.

It's always been there, just waiting for you to plunder it.

All it takes is your attention and a willingness to explore and learn. ♦



In *The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith*, Timothy Larsen illustrates the shift in anthropology from a stance of skepticism and debunking religion to one of engagement and even defense of religious beliefs. Larsen particularly highlights how influential anthropologists such as E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Mary Douglas, and Victor and Edith Turner challenged earlier notions that sought to discredit Christianity.









**“O sometimes  
I feel like a  
motherless child,**

**A long way from  
home.**

**It gets so lonely  
sometimes**

**I just want to cry.”  
— Spiritual**

*Towards a deeper, more fulfilling life*

# AN END TO LONELINESS

## **WE WERE ALL GOING TO BE SO HAPPY.**

It was just a decade ago.

Web 2.0 was going to connect everyone. The “global village” would no longer be just a catchphrase but a compelling new reality. Already, the “Facebook Revolution” in Cairo had seemingly shown how social media could turn back tyranny and liberate human beings everywhere. All the knowledge of the world would be at our fingertips. Supremely connected, we were destined to become wise and powerful.

That was such a long time ago.

A decade later, we see that everything that had achieved scale in social media was there to hook us, no matter the cost to our psyches. Facebook emerged as a tool to be used by tyrants to keep us distracted, ignorant and submissive. Global brands dreamed of being tyrants too, ceaselessly controlling the information to which we would be exposed to guide our every decision.

And in the developed world, an outbreak of loneliness rages on with no end in sight. It is at its most powerful with teenagers who own smartphones and are heavy users of social media. Teen suicide rates have never been higher.

The answer clearly will not come from yet another social media app.

*Voluntary* aloneness can be a salutary choice.

It can help you put an end to constantly worrying about what other people think of you.

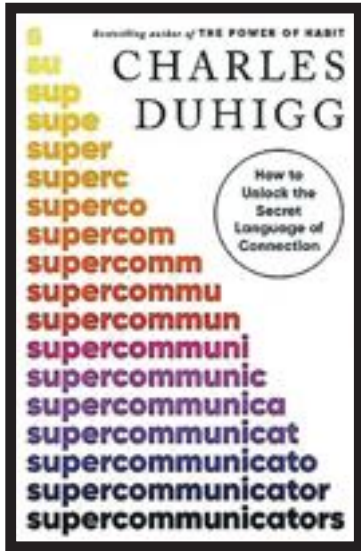
“Everyone is isolated from everyone else. The concept of society is like a cushion to protect us from the knowledge of that isolation. A fiction that serves as an anesthetic.”

Paul Bowles



“The most terrible poverty of all is loneliness and the feeling of being unloved.”

Saint Teresa of Calcutta



Charles Duhigg's marvelous book offers you powerful insights into ways of having deeper communication with your fellow human beings. It will teach you how to spot the kind of conversation your partner is trying to have with you. Are they looking to be helped in a practical way? Or are they seeking to just to be heard? Or to receive an affirmation? And it will teach you how to give your partner a way to express their deepest feelings and dreams.

It can deepen your consciousness in stillness and silence.

It can rejuvenate your inspiration.

This is why the first monasteries were built by hermits – who in the monastic rule found a new way to tap into the benefits of both solitude and community.

But voluntary aloneness is a different thing altogether from the isolated lifestyle: staying home all day, spending too much time on screens, trolling.

Isolation attempts to treat our fundamental existential aloneness by creating even more of the same. Its deepest motivations are fear, rejection, refusal. It is not away from the world; it is against the world. Addictive behaviors offer the illusion of escape but often make our isolation even worse. Ultimately, it leads to pointlessness, despair and suicide.

*So what's the answer?*

Give what you want to receive.

For the greatest gift we can give others requires no credit card. It is empathetic attention fuelled by caring curiosity. Today, make someone feel seen and heard. Do it for someone you know - friend, family member, colleague - or someone you just met from whom you get a lonely vibe. Really do it. You can't cheat. People know if you just going through the motions, if your heart isn't really into it.

Every person on the planet has a divine spark in them, often buried under misery and the regrets caused by poor choices. Listen for this spark. Really try – and you will hear it if you're patient. And the person you're talking to will feel it too.

The quotidian miracle of giving that which you wish to receive is that you will change into someone who feels less and less lonely and more and more connected. You will become more and more aware of the invisible, mysterious love that surrounds you – one which you had missed by not paying attention to it.

And how do Catholic practices aid in the pursuit of such a transformation?

The sacramental approach to life surrounds you with signs that make the invisible visible.

Confession gives you a sensory experience of release from the isolating effects of shame and the return of self-acceptance and hope.

Communion is not just a social club of hobbyists (as delightful as these can be) but a sensory experience that aligns all present towards a higher purpose and an increased shared confidence to... go for it.

Reading the Psalms connects you to the great poetry of the lone voice of all those who seek God.

The practice of daily prayer in the life of a Christian swells and begins to gradually encompass all of one's daily life, including moments of solitude.

Your life becomes more precious and unique and the people you encounter begin to shine more brightly.

This has no price. It is freely available to you all the time. Knock and it will open for you. ♦



TURN TO ME  
AND BE GRACIOUS TO ME  
FOR I AM LONELY AND AFFLICTED  
RELIEVE THE TROUBLES  
OF MY HEART  
AND FREE ME FROM  
MY ANGUISH.





*Beyond greeting card sympathy*

# TRUE COMPASSION

**IN J.D. SALINGER'S 1951 HEART-BREAKING NOVEL *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE*, THE TROUBLED TEENAGE PROTAGONIST HOLDEN CAULFIELD IS CONSTANTLY CATCHING SIGHT OF THE BROKENNESS OF HUMAN BEINGS.**

One of his most used expressions is, "I felt sorry as hell for them." But when his teacher Mr. Spencer tries to tell him of the danger of his own errant ways, Holden is filled with disdain for the pity Mr. Spencer shows him. Holden Caulfield's revulsion at being pitied is primordially human and illustrates the important difference between compassion and pity – a distinction often lost on people who want to be seen as compassionate.

Pity might look like compassion but creates distance between the sufferer and the one who is pitied. "That's awful. What a terrible thing." While pity at least acknowledges the distress of the one who is suffering, it isn't the same as compassion. You know that someone has compassion for you when you sense that they are willing to feel the same pain as you. For them to do that, there must be room in their heart for you, something missing from mere expressions of pity. This is why we hear offended people in distress say, "I don't want your pity." It just makes them feel more alone in their suffering.

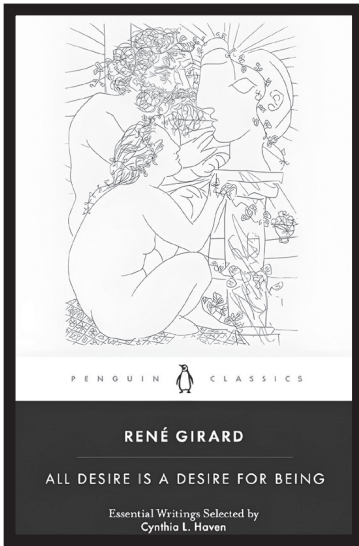
There is something arguably selfish at the heart of pity. In the modern practice of "mercy killing," are we motivated by real compassion – or by our desire to be free of the spectacle of the suffering of another person?

Pity shines  
a light on the  
sensibilities of  
the one who feels  
it. Compassion  
shines a light on  
the one who is  
suffering.

“Compassion is not a sentiment but is making justice and doing works of mercy.

Compassion is not the path of salvation – but it expresses it.”

Saint Vincent de Paul



Rene Girard explores how our desires are often imitated from others, leading to rivalry and violence. His analysis ranges from ancient myths to modern social behaviors, making his work highly relevant in today's context of social media and populism. This anthology, skillfully edited by Cynthia L. Haven, presents Girard's ideas in an accessible and engaging manner, providing readers with a deeper understanding of the fundamental drivers of human behavior and the pervasive influence of imitation in our lives.

Compassion does not seek to shrug off the misery of another person but to surrender to it in the hope of ending the other person's aloneness and to assist them by at the very least taking their suffering upon oneself.

Human beings have an inherent ability to be compassionate but there is nothing automatic about it. Expediency gets in the way. "I don't have time for this. It's their fault anyway. I can't save everybody. Oh well, thoughts and prayers." This is particularly true when the person who is in trouble is a stranger to us and when there is no one to observe our lack of compassion.

Human beings have not always felt shame about their lack of compassion. The Roman Empire gave the world clean water, excellent roads and the rule of law. And, within the limits of the science of the day, they had capable doctors – but no free hospitals for the poor. The woman who lost the protection of her husband in that ancient patriarchal culture was as good as dead. The idea of sympathy for the victim of the vicissitudes of life was useless sentimentality for the confident upwardly mobile Roman.

What rocked the ancient Empire was the epochal explosion of Christianity. Never before had the founder of a religion immortalized himself by allowing himself to become a victim of a mob lynching, offering his suffering as a means of redemption for all.

Compassion and kindness live in all human hearts, believers and non-believers alike, but no other force in human history has fueled compassion as powerfully as the enduring symbol of the Christian cross. This is why Richard Dawkins, who firmly believes the assertions of Christianity are pure nonsense, nevertheless identifies as a "cultural Christian." He wants to live in a culture that has compassion for the victim; he knows the power that Christianity has had on that part of culture that shapes our moral imagination.

The anthropologist René Girard examined neolithic religions where "sacred murder" was a common practice. First it was human sacrifice which helped every community come together by choosing victims who would carry the weight of their seething, unresolved egoic envies and frustrations. As societies evolved, animals substituted for humans. Girard found in the event of the crucifixion of Jesus a revolutionary overturning of the validity of scapegoating. Jesus was blameless – yet the humanity that surrounded him demanded he be put to death. Once we beheld what we had done, the idea that we can look upon anyone as a scapegoat for our own evil is destroyed.

Therefore, the Christian practice of venerating the Cross calls out to us to imitate Jesus and to take up our willingness to suffer compassion as a means of saving the entire world, one person at a time.

From the time of Jesus to the modern day, the radical compassion of the Cross has eroded the confidence undergirding practices like slavery and revenge killing - even the legitimacy of capital punishment. The Cross endures as an increasingly uncredited slow-release foment of positive social change. ♦

**“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which He looks with compassion on this world.”**

**— Saint Teresa of Avila**



*How Christianity transcends political correctness*

# THE TRAGEDY OF PERFORMATIVE RESPECT

**THERE IS NOTHING THAT WILL MAKE YOU FEEL SO LONELY AS SOMEONE PRETENDING TO RESPECT YOU WHEN IT IS OBVIOUS THAT THEY DON'T.**

Loneliness is the cosmic background of one of the great comedies of our time *Barbie: Adventures in Dreamland*. In the midst of her painful and confusing quest for meaning, Barbie discovers that her creators at Mattel have chosen for CEO an obnoxious man, played by Will Ferrell who declares, “Hey, I’ve been empowering women since before that was trending.”

The effect of performative respect is little different than open indifference. It isolates us. At least when someone deliberately treats us poorly, it’s out in the open for all to see.

Amid a loneliness epidemic – fueled in part by the isolating effects of performative respect – the twentieth century French philosopher Simone Weil sheds light on what it means to truly respect another person.

Weil received the highest grade for philosophy at the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1930. The second highest grade was received by Simone de Beauvoir who wrote about her at the age of 18, “I envied her for having a heart that could beat right across the entire world.”

Weil made a philosophical journey that started in Marxist atheism and culminated in Catholic mysticism.

She meditated on the seeming irreconcilability of God’s goodness



**Simone Weil — philosopher, mystic, activist.**

with the presence of evil in humans and the existence of destructive forces in nature. She had the insight that God, in a supreme act of love, created a world in which divine presence was withdrawn. God self-limited to cede space to The Other.

The way to understand God, Weil thought, was to empty yourself completely in the presence of another person asking only, “What have you been going through?”

This wasn’t just a theory for Weil. Intensely committed to worker’s rights, while teaching at a secondary school in Le Puy, she took a sabbatical for

a year in order to go incognito and work in factory so that she could personally understand what it felt like to be a worker among workers. Outraged at the arrival of fascism in Spain, she volunteered for combat duty in the Republican movement placing herself on the frontlines of combat.

In her religious practice, she pursued self-emptying in prayer, finding in her devotions and contemplation a way to mirror God’s loving self-emptying.

Weil gives us a modern expression of the concept of Imago Dei as first affirmed in the Book of Genesis: all humans were created in the image

“If you judge people, you have no time to love them.”  
—Saint Teresa of Calcutta



of God. As such, each human has an infinite value and an inviolable dignity – not based on their status or power but on their nature as manifestations of love. Which is why Pope Francis's *Dignitas Infinita* declares, "Human beings have the same inviolable dignity in every age of history, and no one can consider themselves authorized by particular situations to deny this conviction or to act against it."

Hence the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." To love God is to love your neighbour. The Golden Rule emphasizes empathy and compassion, directing us to consider the perspectives and needs of others in all our interactions.

This love extends not only to those who are similar or close to us but also to strangers, enemies, and those who may be marginalized or disadvantaged. Respecting others is an expression of this love, which seeks their well-being and flourishing.

Christianity places a strong emphasis on humility and servanthood as virtues to be cultivated. Christians are called to consider others as more important than themselves and to serve one another in love. Respecting others involves recognizing their needs, honoring their perspectives, and humbly serving them as Jesus did.

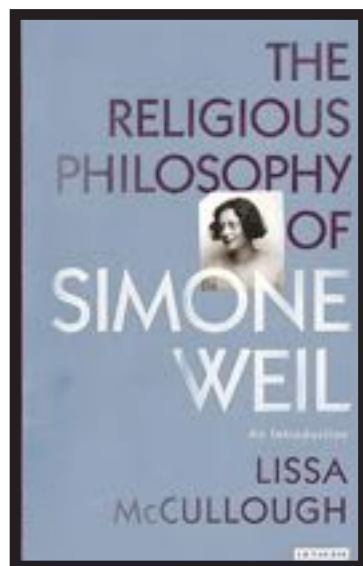
And central to the Christian faith is the concept of forgiveness and reconciliation. Christians are called to forgive others as they have been forgiven by God, seeking to restore broken relationships and promote peace. Respecting others involves extending forgiveness, seeking reconciliation, and working towards unity and harmony.

On the surface, Christians are politically correct.

But the practice of self-emptying before the Imago Dei that is every human being is an antidote to many of the more isolating performative acts of respect:

- ❖ The way politicians pretend to respect marginalized communities to garner praise and support from voters and advance their own agenda for power.
- ❖ Corporate greenwashing in which the appearance is more important than the substance of doing good.
- ❖ Tokenism, when companies hire people on the basis of quotas in order to maintain the appearance of inclusion rather than genuinely respecting all human beings.
- ❖ General insincerity in interpersonal relationships when people pretend to respect your boundaries or choices while in fact harboring undisclosed biases.

As Simone Weil showed us, simply asking, with no objective for personal gain, "What have you been going through?" and then listening with an open heart is the way to end the modern epidemic of loneliness, one person at a time. ♦



Called "the only true great spirit of our time" by Albert Camus, Simone Weil was a prolific writer whose complete works span 16 volumes. Here, Lissa McCullough does us the service of organizing the thinking of Simone Weil into a superbly readable, compact and cogent narrative. Highly recommended.

*The spiritual power of anonymity*

# WHY DOING GOOD SHOULD BE KEPT SECRET

## **WHAT VEGAN HASN'T WISHED FROM TIME TO TIME THAT THEY COULD BE ANONYMOUS IN THEIR CHOICE?**

Though they want everyone to adopt the vegan way of life, they still don't want to inconvenience their non-vegan friends who want to have them over for a meal or get together at a convenient restaurant.

They know quite well the joke that goes, "How can you tell if someone is a vegan? Don't worry, they'll tell you." Or why Todd Ingram is the least likeable of all the romantic rivals in *Scott Pilgrim vs The World*: he is so invincibly smug.

Pity the vegan (if you're not one yourself). Their discipline deserves respect. But many suspect them of doing it just to command attention or worse, to guilt trip everyone who isn't vegan – including their nemesis, the "flexitarians."

But is it so wrong to want recognition for your ethical choices and to try to influence others to do the same?

After all, scouts have their merit badges and veterans have their medals. These call attention to something greater than those they decorate. They represent the power of doing good, living virtuously and being bravely unselfish.

Praising someone who has done good reinforces their desire to do it again. It's a form of benevolent manipulation. It works for children. It works for dogs. (Alas, it does not work for cats.)



Call it virtue signaling if you want. But let's be realistic. We all need it. We all do it. It can help make the world a better place.

Yet if someone does something good, motivated chiefly by being noticed and praised, it feels hollow. And if they do so for the purpose of raising their status or acquiring power over us – like Scott Pilgrim's vegan rival – it inspires our contempt.

We read a list of benefactors and come across the words, "An Anonymous Donor." It's thrilling. Someone has released their grip on their money to do good and has deliberately eschewed any public recognition for that. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," proclaims the Kohelet. But before the anonymous donor, the Kohelet must fall silent.

In the Christian tradition, still so influential among atheists and agnostics, the greatest deeds are those that accrue no credit to the doer.

The debt that modern society owes to Christianity - without realizing it - is brilliantly chronicled in Tom Holland's entertaining read, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*.

Saint Teresa of Avila would look alarmed if someone praised her words or actions. She was intensely aware of her seizing upon the praise to inflame her own vanity.

*"When you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and the streets that they may have their glory. Assuredly, I say to you, they have received their full reward."*

— Mathew 6:2

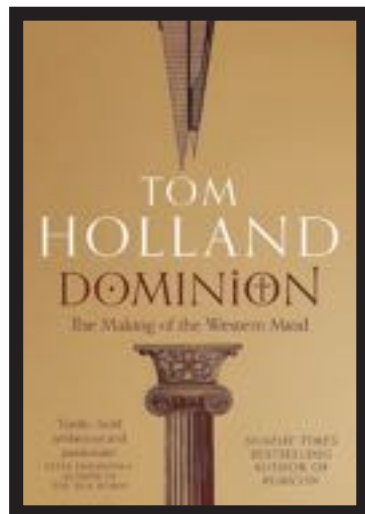
Humility is a requirement for doing good in a Godly way. Saint Vincent de Paul was vastly influential in making 17th Century France a culture that paid more compassionate attention to the needs of the poor. He instructed his followers, "Let us pray that the poor will forgive us for helping them."

Doing good anonymously can be particularly poignant when you combine it with a gratitude meditation, reflecting on all those who, in your journey in through life, have helped you along your way without seeking to gain anything from it.

The joy of doing good in secret is not by itself a scientific proof for the existence of God. But it is an experience that is available to you every day. Christian anthropology defines it as an action that is also a symbol: a sign of the unconditional goodness of God. ♦

"Hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue."

— La Rochefoucauld



Tom Holland's *Dominion* reveals how Christianity has profoundly shaped Western thought, culture, and values, even for those who do not subscribe to the faith. By tracing the historical evolution of Christian principles and their pervasive influence on modern secular ideologies such as human rights, democracy, and social justice, Holland provides a compelling narrative that reveals the often overlooked roots of contemporary moral and ethical frameworks. This insightful analysis offers a deeper understanding of how Christian ideas have permeated and shaped the very fabric of Western civilization, making it a must-read for anyone interested in the origins of modern societal norms and values.



*A radical alternative to contemporary chaos*

# SPIRITUALITY AND SEX

## **PERHAPS THE BIGGEST OBSTACLE TO BECOMING A CATHOLIC IS THE QUESTION OF SEXUAL FREEDOM.**

This has been the case only for a generation or two. Prior to that the teachings of the Catholic Church on sexuality were broadly accepted by mainstream society.

The sexual revolution changed all that.

But is society better off with all its new-found freedoms?

Consider some of the fruits of the sexual revolution:

- ❖ Hardcore pornography and its frequent violent objectification of women accounts for more than a third of all traffic on the Internet.
- ❖ 50% of children under the age of 13 have viewed hardcore pornography.
- ❖ Teenage boys now routinely generate AI images of their female classmates nude or engaged in sex acts.
- ❖ The divorce rate has increased to over 40%.
- ❖ Impotence is on the rise among adult men; frequent use of pornography and masturbation are often believed to be the cause.
- ❖ Young men now routinely ask their girlfriends to perform degrading sex acts that mirror what they have seen performed in porn.

Could the Catholic view on sexuality be something worth reconsidering – or is it just a relic of narrow-minded prudery and repression?



“There is no saint without a past, no sinner without a future.”  
— Saint Augustine

Interestingly enough, people reading the Bible for the first time are often shocked when encountering The Song of Solomon, an erotically charged love poem.

“Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand. Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle. Your head crowns you like Carmel, and your flowing locks

are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses. How fair and pleasant you are, O loved one, delectable maiden! You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its branches. Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples, and your kisses like the best wine that goes down smoothly, gliding over lips and teeth.”

They might be equally shocked if they read the





“There is no pain in life equal to that which two lovers can inflict on each other.”

— Cyril Connolly

teachings of the Bishop Karol Wojtyla who would later become Pope, Saint John-Paul II, in his book *Love and Responsibility*:

“Intercourse must not serve merely as a means of allowing sexual excitement to reach its climax in one of the partners, i.e. the man alone, but that climax must be reached in harmony, not at the expense of one partner, but with both partners fully involved.”

Whaaaaat? Aren't Catholics pursed-lip prudes who think that sex is dirty? What's all this talk about the beauty of a woman's breasts and the joy of simultaneous orgasm?

All of Christianity's roots are Jewish. And it is an ancient Judaic custom to refer to the gathered congregation as the “bride.” Jesus used this metaphor when he said to his apostles, “You are the bride. I am the groom.”

In other words, the rapture of sex is fully embraced as it becomes the metaphor for the ecstatic union of God and human beings.

Sex, therefore, is not only fully good – and certainly not dirty – but the highest earthly experience any human being can have, the one physical event that most closely approximates union with the divine.

In the Catholic view, sex isn't just "a bodily function." It is so powerful and so exquisite that it demands reverence and like all the most powerful experiences that guide us into the transcendent – such as wine or the comfort of rest – it needs boundaries and respect lest we let it run amok and completely rule our lives. We don't want to become alcoholics, layabouts – or sex addicts.

If the early Christians come across as prudes, consider the cultural context of the ancient Roman empire in which Christianity first took root. Masters routinely raped their slaves, including children. Powerful men routinely treated their wives as decorative sex toys and flaunted their mistresses, casting aside their wives when they grew bored of them. The Emperor Nero had a giant nude statue erected of himself drawing attention to his shapely buttocks which stood next to the mighty Coliseum in which the populace of Rome gathered daily to watch the exciting spectacle of people being tortured and torn apart. The good luck symbol that adorned the garden of every prosperous Roman was an erect phallus. Sex and cruelty were everywhere. The early Christians reined in these powerful drives. It took centuries for Christianity to re-shape the moral view of sex in Western culture. It was so successful that even modern post-Christian culture is still shocked by what the ancient Romans comfortably considered "only natural."

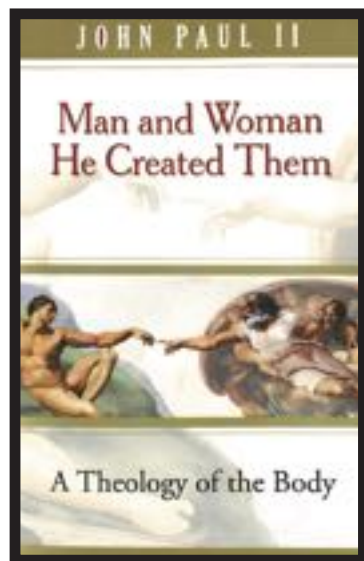
Unless, of course, you are a victim of modern porn which has unleashed once again sex and cruelty and entrains younger and younger people to experience sex as something transgressive, a game of power and fantasy in which the user becomes an egoic satrap reigning over his submissive harem – a world in which the most perverted and demented ancient Romans would have felt at home.

Adult converts to Catholicism often come to realize that they are trauma victims when they consider the early age at which they were exposed to pornography. They can reclaim their boundaries and gradually acquire a healthier respect for the joy of sex. As it is for culture, so it is for the individual: it doesn't take place overnight.

Yes, it's the closest thing there is to Heaven, but if we become obsessed, it turns into a Hellish kind of slavery that makes us into depraved users rather than thoughtful givers.

The answer is in fact to ground it in the natural, perfected by true love. In John Paul II's remarkable book on the theology of the body, he puts forth a rich insight. What if the opposite of loving someone is not hating them but using them.

When it comes to sex, our bodies are so equipped that when we have sex with another person, we inevitably feel a soul bond with



*The Theology of the Body* presents a profound philosophical and anthropological exploration of human sexuality, relationships, and the human body's sacredness. It transcends religious boundaries by addressing universal questions about human identity, dignity, and the purpose of love and relationships. John Paul II's reflections offer a unique perspective on the interconnectedness of the body, mind, and spirit, providing valuable insights into the human experience that resonate with individuals from diverse backgrounds, fostering a deeper appreciation for the complexity and beauty of human existence.



them. But if we are just using them, we become emotionally calloused and deny the spirituality of sex.

Perhaps the hurt and ache that comes from knowing that a person we have had sex with is “at it again” with someone else is by itself one of the great arguments for life-long sexual fidelity. Yes, we might have “natural” urges to have more than one sexual partner but it’s also “natural” that everyone involved is going to experience emotional pain – notwithstanding arguments to the contrary by the proponents of polyamory.

These are challenging truths for the children of the sexual revolution. But once accepted, they lead to a new set of attitudes that make it possible to enjoy sex at its fullest and most joyful:

- ❖ Respect, not fear.
- ❖ Mastery, not repression.
- ❖ Modesty, not shame.

The Church is a community of sinful human beings seeking to better themselves in the light of God’s love. Its history has episodes where sexual drives run rampant, and hypocrisy stares us the face. Libidinous medieval monks. Renaissance popes. The persecution of non-conforming sexuality. And most recently, the great scandal of pedophile priests. All of these are diabolical attacks on human beings at their weakest and can serve as a pretext to dismiss the teachings of the Church.

Indeed, if you investigate the origins of the modern scandal, you will find that it doesn’t support the view that priestly celibacy is an unachievable state (as challenging as it is). You will find that in the aftermath of the sexual revolution, a number of determined homosexual priests took over a handful of seminaries and entered the priesthood with the goal of using their status in the community and the trust extended to them by troubled mothers to prey upon their sons and introduce them to homosexual sex. The tragic naivete, or, worse, the corruption of bishops and cardinals, who simply transferred these offenders to new parishes and covered up their crimes is despicable and deeply offensive to the victims and their families.

The Church is in the process of acknowledging this evil and completely reforming how it recruits and selects priests to make reparations for this great sin.

Whether you’re a believer or just enquiring about the Catholic religion, spare a moment in prayer please that this reform be complete so that the Church may fully return to its divine mission which includes honoring and protecting the great gift of human sexuality. ♦

When we use another human being solely for pleasure, we deny them the dignity of their person.

*The secret mirth of Christ*

# THE HOLINESS OF A GOOD LAUGH

**TO KNOW JOHN WAS TO LOVE HIM. BUT HE WAS NO SAINT.**

A Chelsea toff if ever there was one, he'd been hugely successful at investment banking, but he'd lived a riotous life after hours, giving much grief to his wife and children. In his later years, he gave up the drink and became more spiritual and constructive, amending his ways.

Then he got a diagnosis of terminal cancer and faced it bravely. His funeral was held at the Brompton Oratory, with the finest in traditional Catholic liturgy observed meticulously. The Oratory was packed. As John's casket was carried down the aisle, the choir sang a gorgeously somber introit by Palestrina.

The officiating priest welcomed those attending and shared that he had been privileged to have searching and fearless conversations with John as death approached. John had even given him precise instructions as to which sacred music should be sung at his funeral mass.

"We have complied with John's excellent choices in every regard except one," the priest said. "I had to tell John, I'm afraid, that it was completely out of the question that we would perform *Just a Spoonful of Sugar Helps the Medicine Go Down*."

The tightly collared congregation burst into resounding laughter.

"Human beings are the only animals that laugh; they are the one animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be."

William Hazlitt

**“Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand.”**

**— Mark Twain**



And is there anything more triumphant than being able to laugh at a funeral?

For nothing is more sobering than death but if its inescapable finality makes us permanently grim, then what's the point of remaining alive?

All forms of healthy authority – parent or president – thrive when they can laugh at themselves. Tyrants don't just muzzle the press, they squelch comedy. But good kings and queens share space with their jesters.

Sometimes, the funniest thing of all is the obvious truth which we nevertheless all pretend doesn't exist. A well-placed bon mot changes lives – indeed can even change history. Hence the threat it poses to tyrants and hypocrites.

As it is for society, so it is for the individual. If we can't lay bare our vanity and pretensions, it is all but assured that we will stop growing into better versions of ourselves.

The ancient Jews did not invent self-deprecating humour but they were - and remain - great masters of it. You see its enduring power in Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* whose slogan appeared next to a picture of a cushy chair and a TV remote: "Make yourself uncomfortable."

It is no accident that one of the greatest books about the ins and outs of the spiritual life is a satiric romp from start to finish. As one senior devil advises a foolish junior devil on how to corrupt a human's search for God, he shares how much he loathes the human propensity to laugh and be merry because it is so offensive to the majestic solemnity of Hell.

Two of Jesus's followers, the fishermen brothers James and John had anger management issues. When they were trekking through Samaria, they were subjected to insults by a gang of Samaritans. James and John, deeply offended, urged Jesus to rain down fire from Heaven on them. Jesus told them they had much to learn about the Kingdom of Heaven and gave them the nickname, "Sons of Thunder" – which, if you think about it would be a great team name at WrestleMania.

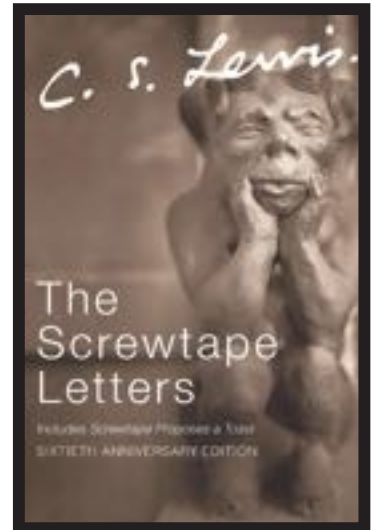
AND NOW, FROM CAPERNAUM, FEEL THE WRATH OF THE SONS OF THUNDER! No doubt it took them a while to get over that moniker, but it's not hard to imagine a crabby elderly John chuckling as he remembered how Jesus used to call him Son of Thunder.

In fact, G.K. Chesterton offered us a glimpse of what he discerned was always present in the person of Jesus:

"The tremendous figure which fills the Gospels towers in this respect, as in every other, above all the thinkers who ever thought themselves tall. His pathos was natural, almost casual. The Stoics, ancient and modern, were proud of concealing their tears. He never concealed His tears; He showed them plainly on His open

"If you can laugh at yourself, you are going to be fine. If you allow others to laugh with you, you are going to be great."

Martin Niemoller



C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* offers a witty and imaginative exploration of human nature, morality, and the struggles between good and evil. Presented as a series of letters from a senior demon, Screwtape, to his nephew, the book's sharp satire and psychological insights provide a captivating analysis of the human condition, making it a compelling read for anyone interested in understanding the complexities of human motivations and the moral dilemmas we all face.



face at any daily sight, such as the far sight of His native city. Yet He concealed something. Solemn supermen and imperial diplomatists are proud of restraining their anger. He never restrained His anger. He flung furniture down the front steps of the Temple and asked men how they expected to escape the damnation of Hell. Yet He restrained something. I say it with reverence; there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth."

The truth is, when you have boundaries, it's easier to play and it's easier to laugh – both of


which are essential to sanity itself. The insane are often quite grim. Or possessed by a cackling laughter that wrecks everything.

When you become Catholic, you delight in merriment – but you also stop being drawn to the chaotic pranks of drunks and teenagers; you see them for what they are: sadly immature and rude.

You find yourself having a good laugh more frequently – but also moving away from the nihilistic style of humour which begins with raucous laughter but ends in free-floating anxiety.

Finally, as we discover ourselves to be just another sinner trying to grow into a better human being by following the footsteps of Christ, we find it more and more possible to laugh at ourselves.

And it is such a relief. ♦



THOSE WHO LOOK  
TO GOD WILL BE  
**RADIANT**  
THEIR FACES WILL  
NEVER BE ASHAMED.

(PSALM 34:5)

If you enjoy Radiance, let us know and receive a free subscription.

[radiancemagazine.co.uk](http://radiancemagazine.co.uk)



