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REFLECTION on the death of Br. Peter Zhou, OSB

CURTIS KAUFFMAN, OBL.OSB

Editor's Note: Many people had much to say about Br. Peter after his passing. I would like to share one oblate's impression of this monk who led such an intense and focused life. Curtis Kaufmann is an oblate and friend of the Abbey.

IT HAPPENED IN JULY, 2019 ON a week-end retreat at the Abbey. Following the beauty and solemnity of Vigils and Lauds, with their quiet chant of Psalms echoing throughout the chapel, the bell calls us to breakfast in the silent company of the monastic community. I am mesmerized by the steam rising from my coffee. "Let my prayer come before you like incense..." The ancient monk across from me is deep in silence and I watch in curiosity as he fills his cup, pouring way too much into the available space. The Lord said: "Let his cup overflow. A great abundance has been poured into the tiny vessel." Ahh, I see. This morning ritual is rich with symbols of God's grace. **There is something happening here.**

How is it that I am here? Here, at an intersection of my sinfulness and this monk's holiness, both occupying the same space? How did I get here? What did I do to deserve this gift? Certainly nothing. I feel that I am not worthy to be in the presence of this holy one. My journey has been anything but an undeterred focus on God. It is a jagged road often veering into the wilderness that has led me here. What am I meant to learn from Brother Peter? I have been led here for reasons not yet known to me. **I watch and wait.**

The retreat's theme for the week-end is the virtue of humility. There has been great reading, study, prayer, and exegesis on the topic of how we are to live out the humility that our Holy Father Benedict carefully and methodically outlined for us ages upon ages ago. It always sounds achievable when contemplated in Lectio. Then in the throes of daily life the concept becomes abstract, hazy, distant. How can anyone imitate the humility of Christ in the face of the realities of this world? **Purity of heart.**

He was twenty-four and I was two when he made his monastic profession. Seventy-two years ago. He spent twenty-six of those years in solitary confinement in a Chinese prison. Beaten, tortured, humiliated because of his unwavering faith in Christ, a faith he refused to abandon. Then, forty-six years of stability, obedience, and daily conversion — a fidelity that is a gift beyond value. Br. Peter's lived humility is a witness to that which I try to grasp in Benedict's Rule. It is beyond explanation. Br. Peter, of all people, surely deserves release from the obligations of hospitality. Yet here he is with a true servant's heart serving me. Humility as it is meant to be lived. **Here is my icon to ponder, my silent explanation.**

A last and final torment awaited. Covid brought an isolation that reminded Peter of his prison years, deprived as he was of the comfort of his community and the consistency of his daily liturgies, Br. Peter was left to endure his final two years without the daily gift of filling the water jars for the guests, **his personal act of feet washing.**

These are my thoughts as his brother monks lower the humble pine casket containing this holy monk into his final resting place. Thank you, Brother Peter, for sharing your life with me, for the humility you modeled, and for the example you gave all of us of how to find peace, happiness, and purity of heart in our faith journey. **Well done good and faithful servant. ✠**

Enclose, my heart, this blessed wonder * For Fr. Angelus Echeverry

1.
The sky a dark, ragged triangle.
The lagoon's water a black mirror.
City lights, like distant stars, hang
quivering beyond the western shoreline.

Low spirits drag me down this early morning,
deep into existential ordinariness:
this thin slice of time allotted on this earth.

2.
What lasts, if anything?

Is it true Christ's Sermon on the Mount
goes on echoing through the universe,
after two thousand years?

Shakespeare's voice is heard, still, at the
Globe
and on a thousand other stages around
the world.

I cried in front of Rembrandt's self-portrait,
this older man,
still alive at the Met, New York City.

I heard with my own ears
Bach's "*Schließet, mein Herze, dieses selige
Wunder*,"*
sung on Christmas Eve in St. Andrew's
Abbey chapel,
four hundred years after it rang through
St. Thomas Cathedral, Leipzig.

3.
The luminous ones, their creations
endure all time and place.

The holy ones,
their words live through eternity.

Nothing fades into nothingness.

Feast of all that is, that was, and that will be.

— Marie Pal Brown

Broken Alleluia

An angel wing hovers low in the December
sky.

Its white cloud feathers
bloom into the orange hues of glowing
embers
and the mauve of another vanishing day.
Until a wind brushes away the sacred vestige,
and a darkening heaven swallows it whole.

Below the cloak of early evening,
nine rafts, each a skeleton pyramid,
float in the lagoon's swelling body.

I stand at my study window,
a snowy egret swooping past,
coots huddling in the shallows along the
shore,
the jagged shadows of trees crouching in
the distance.

Ah! A thousand bursts of light –
nine humble frames
become nine dazzling Christmas trees.

My heart will search the heavens for wings.
I pray that the angels may raise their
trumpets.
May heal again.

— Marie Pal Brown

* Aria, *Christmas Oratorio*, by J.S. Bach

Things Visible and Invisible

For Fr. Francis Benedict

Think it was a Russian monk who said,
Pause a moment and quietly take in all of
the room
and there is God.

Marin, who painted wonderfully blotchy
seascapes,
as well as rocky landscapes, said
I bow to the landscape,
and when the landscape bows back to me,
then I can begin to paint.

After breakfast, the refectory is filled
with delicious sunlight and quiet
and, oh, these intimations—
How the glasses in rows, the simple white
cups
silently extol their dignities.

For a few moments, no words,
(though I search for them):
The rim-rod ruptures of chatter,
banter,
chick-chock pappy-doo—gone.

The words beneath the words
The weather inside the weather
O thunder and lightning of our souls
O holy stones and sticks
O brokenness that is the way
O horizons with no end
O deep seas that go so deep—deeper

I pause. I bow. I see, and—
I see that I do not see.

—Garrett Brown, 10/21/21

Good Earth

This morning, four trees fallen in the
Chekhov garden
(This is Fr. Eleutherius's front shelf of
well-watered grass, shrubs, tall poplars
It's not a cherry orchard
but for me, it bears that Russian tenderness
touched
by despair and yearning).
Alas, the fallen trees –
we are so many.

It is a slow walk, thoughtful, grateful.
The sky hesitant, not sun-filled, not cloudy.
A crow caws, a few birds chatter.

In the distance, the yellow and black school
bus rumbles
And does start less generous thoughts
(Connecticut, an autumn forest, schooling,
even a kind lost soul named Patrice--).

But. The day. The new morning.

I am on my way to Lauds.
The path is wet and green and fragrant –
Oh, sweet scents of cut grass,
the freshets of cold air filled
with distilled spirits
of old woods
old highways,
Ancient days, ancient nights –

Until the hills, my glad paroxysm:
Not like white elephants, or
racy Diana's thighs but
the crest and fall and undulant joys,
felicitous language of good muscular earth –

Please bear us when we fall and fall hard.

—Garrett Brown, 10/21/21
Valyermo ❄

Piety as Holy Fear

A TRI-PARTITE INTRODUCTION



DONALD P. RICHMOND, DD

WE ARE ALL familiar with the biblical text, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” It would surprise me if any follower of Jesus Christ did not know, and seek to grow, within this fruitful reference to reverence—to piety. Holy fear and practical piety, or holy fear *as* practical piety, are critical to charitable Christian living.

But fear is often misunderstood, and maybe even maligned. For some people it may be a so-called “trigger word” that generates anxiety. This is exceedingly unfortunate. When we reflect upon the words of the Psalmist,

“But there is forgiveness with Thee,
that Thou mayest be feared,”

we receive a renewed perspective. The fear of God is, really, the release of gratitude in the heart of every follower of Jesus Christ for what he has done, is doing, and will do. The trembling we may at times experience is a trembling intensely aware of the fact that our God is “a Consuming Fire”—the blazing flame of love that embraces and empowers every covenanted Christian and, albeit differently, every aspect of creation and creature. As says one of our monastic forebears, “Why not let your entire life become a flame?!”

Developing passionate piety is the purpose of the three-part article that I have written for this edition of the *Valyermo Chronicle*. The first part, “*Practical Piety*,” introduces the topic in three basic “movements”—because practical piety is always, if not only, the movement of God’s love for us, within us, among us and beyond us. The second part, “*The Well-Wrought Word*,” demonstrates how important verbal asceticism is to developing practical

piety. The development of piety requires a discipleship of the tongue—guarding it more carefully within the enclosure of our mouths. Piety is a pilgrimage that begins by closing our mouths. Finally, in “*Curating Catholic Piety*,” I briefly and broadly suggest a number of ways by which followers of Jesus can curate and exhibit Christ as the essential and elemental art of love within and beyond us.

1. PRACTICAL PIETY

Robert Lax’s statement about being a saint, spoken to Thomas Merton in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, is as instructive as it is mundane: We become saints, pious, because we want to. It cannot be simpler, or more satisfying, than that. If we are followers of Jesus Christ through repentance, faith and baptism, and by God’s grace have received the Holy Spirit, *we want to be holy*. The Holy Spirit inspires the hunger for holiness. The Paraclete promotes a passion for piety. If the Christian has no interest in holy living, in spite of our pronounced peccadillos, we have every reason to question our life in God by Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Visioning Piety

What does piety or saintliness look like? Bishop Robert Barron suggests that “saints are extreme and impolitic.” Saint Antony of the Desert asserts, albeit more broadly, that saints will at times look insane. Within certain denominational circles, saints are “holy fools” whose lives upset our common assumptions about how life is and must be. Other people envision saints as people whose lives exhibit extraordinarily exemplar attitudes and actions. And, to be fair, there are some saints that do exhibit these exemplary characteristics, these unusual qualities.

But the vast majority of saints do not. Living piously, living a holy life, is quite

pedestrian in its practicality. Although we may have exaggerated ideas about piety involving ecstatic experiences that radically alter our disposition and direction, holiness and piety are as extraordinarily ordinary as doing what we need to do when we need to do it—for the sole glory of God. Sanctity, piety, is as mundane as doing the laundry and exercising mercy. This is what it is. This is what we and the world need to see. A poem I recently wrote highlights this perspective. It is called “I Seek Saints”:

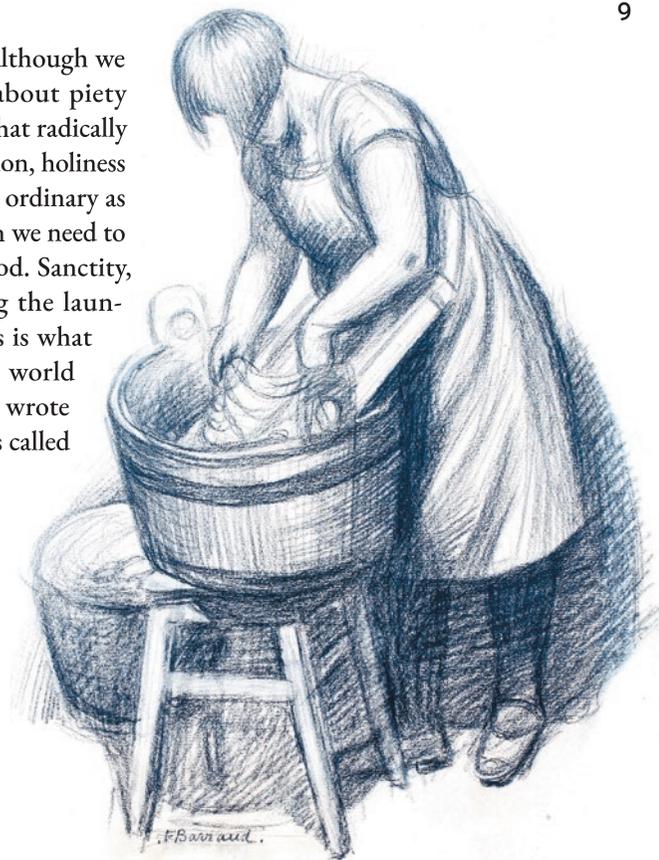
I seek saints
not thin ascetics
or the legions of extremity

Saints without halos
laboring over laundry
and whose prayers are
as pedestrian as the
exercise of mercy

Saints who ascend
by descending
into Christ’s full humanity

When we read the writings of Saint Paul, we will frequently encounter his oft-repeated admonition to “put off” and “put on.” Very briefly, we are called and challenged to “put off” the old self and the old mindset and “put on” the new self and the new mindset. We are, according to Saint Paul, to “be transformed by the renewing of our minds.”

But the renewing of our minds begins with the transformation of our hearts. Heart-change precedes head-change. Similarly, with some exceptions, head-and-heart-change precedes hand-change. By God’s grace, head, heart and hands are dynamically transformed when we encounter the Living Christ and we seek to live in dynamic fellowship with, in and through



him—by the Holy Spirit. And then, of course, comes the work—the working out of our own salvation with hopeful fear and tenacious trembling. This vision is crucial to our solitary vocation of, properly understood, being “like God” and “walking with God.”

Vocational Piety

Piety is the solitary vocation of the Christian. Being saints is our calling. Leon Bloy once wrote that life’s greatest sorrow is not to be a saint. If we are not living our calling, it is a very sad thing indeed! Sainthood is what we are made for. Sainthood is what we are chosen for. Sainthood is what we are called to. But, while not being a saint may be our greatest sorrow, it is also our greatest struggle and our greatest suffering. It requires work.

Without going into too much detail, but capitalizing upon the “put off” and “put on” references I made above, *piety is advanced through Baptism, Eucharist, and Practical Prayer*. Piety is advanced through *Baptism* because our Baptism makes us part of God’s family and implies living according to the family standards which God has set. Upon Baptism, we renounce “the world, the flesh and the devil” and we embrace the Christ-centered commands about loving God and loving neighbor and loving enemies. Similarly, faithfully participating in the *Eucharist* requires rigorous self-evaluation according to God’s standards in the Ten Commandments and the Great Commandment, setting aside sin, seeking reconciliation, and receiving God’s mercy and forgiveness. And, to be clear, Christians seek to live the mercy and the forgiveness they receive. Finally, piety is advanced through participating in *practical prayer*. Saint Thomas More once prayed these words: “The things that we pray for...give us the grace to labor for through Jesus Christ our Lord.” The Christian life is a prayerful life that is rooted in Christ-centered Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist—consciously and committedly—and always through Jesus Christ.

Victorious Piety

We will fail. At times we will fail miserably. We are, and always will be, People of the Imposed Ash! I once heard that the victorious Christian life is getting up when we have fallen down. Although this is rather simplistic and unsatisfying, there is a measure of truth associated with it. Being a saint, therefore, requires living in and through and by the victory of Jesus Christ—living according to *his* suffering, death, resurrection and ascension. Piety is Christ’s mercy which is applied to us who are his people. In *Colossians 3*, one of

Saint Paul’s classic references to “put off” and “put on,” he summarizes everything in verse 14, *Above all put on love, which is the bond of perfection*. If we are truly interested in practical piety, Christian holiness, being saints, it cannot be simpler: Love must be our priority (“Above all”), our practice (“Put on”) and our path (“bond of perfection”). The path from our hunger for holiness to purity of heart is always through mercy.

2. THE WELL-WROUGHT WORD

Words are important. Jesus Christ is identified as the Word, and it is through his Word and by his Word that the world was created and is sustained. Through the prophets and Apostles, God has given us the Written Word. Along with the Sacrament, right words properly orient our worship. These, together, create burning hearts, open blinded eyes and empower people to share the very good news of Jesus Christ. With our words we reshape our church and our culture for good or evil, help or harm, life or death (Proverbs 18:21).

All words are working words, and well-wrought words have a directed divine intention that moves us toward right thinking and right living. But how do we know when and what to speak? How do we know how to speak? There are many good answers to these questions, and notable Christians throughout history have provided us with a number of guidelines and guardrails. Saint Charbel, a Maronite Christian from the late 19th century, has provided us with at least one. Charbel suggests that if our words are not more edifying than our silence, we should likely remain silent. This is an excellent caution by which to govern our conversation.

As might be expected, the Bible also has a great deal to say about the use of

the tongue, about how we use our words. One biblical text, from 1 Peter 4:11, provides us with at least three broad directives for speaking well-wrought words. Here we read, “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God” (1 Peter 4:11, KJV), and here we find our threefold

outweighs speech. Caution often outweighs conversation. How often have we spoken words that we regret? How often have we spoken words that do not edify, sanctify or glorify? How often have we torn down and not built up? Even God Himself chose the right time to speak all of



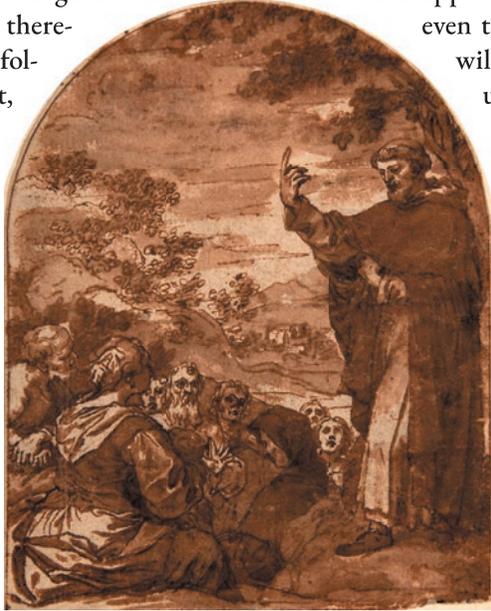
directives about the question of speech, the importance of speech and the content of speech.

When 1 Peter 4:11 uses the word “if,” it calls us to question the necessity of speaking. The word “if,” as well as an analysis of Christian history itself, tells us that there is always a question of speech. Speech is not a “given” or a “must.” Silence often

being into existence. Obviously, therefore, any time and any speech are not acceptable. There are right and wrong times, right and wrong words. When considering conversation, the how and when and why of speaking, we must ask ourselves whether God is best served by our speech or by our silence. Just because a word can be given, does not mean that a word must be given.

Many things can be said, but that does not mean that many things should be said.

As well, our text from 1 Peter 4 emphasizes the importance of speech. This is nothing new, although we often forget it. God speaks. God has gifted us with speech. We, therefore, must speak. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called and commissioned to speak good news that edifies others and glorifies God. Speaking is important. The words “let him” in our text implies — among other things — that there is a permissibility and a purpose of speaking. The *permissibility of speaking* suggests that, as all true speech is rooted and grounded in God, our conversation must be Christ-like and Christ-centered. Christian speech is always, in some way, borrowed speech. Are our words, words that we have so-to-speak borrowed from the vocabulary of God, in keeping with His identity and His intention? Conversation is a commission, but it is a cautious commission that must be dominated by *caritas* (heart, love). Similarly, the *purpose of speaking* suggests that all true speech is inspirationally intentional. There is, consequently, no such thing as “casual conversation.” And, while this statement might be a bit of an exaggeration (as every facet of speech bears a conscious or unconscious intention), we would be wise to think about how very careful God was and is with His words.



Finally, there is the content of speaking. 1 Peter 4: 11 tells us that our words must be spoken as if they were the “oracles of God.” This is a very high and holy calling, indeed! We of course understand and appreciate that our words, even the best of our words, will never aspire to the

unique graces that God has endowed the writers of our Holy Bible. They had a unique call. They had a unique commission. Their words bore, and continue to bear, a unique charism. Nevertheless, if we embrace what St. Peter tells us, our words must be chosen as if they were God’s very oracles. The oracles of God, Bible-words so-to-speak, are the content of what we say. God’s speech must dominate and direct our speech.

God has given us words, language. Words are important, essential, a matter of life or death. Are we crafting well-wrought words? Good speech is God speech, God inspired, guided and guarded.

3. CURATING CATHOLIC PIETY

One of the most important art exhibits that I ever saw was curated by the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. *Holy Image / Hallowed Ground, Icons from Sinai* exhibited a vast collection of ancient Christian art that had never been seen by the general public. This rare event was, in my opinion, a once in a lifetime experience. It was, truly, an experience to behold.

But what made this event so exceedingly engaging was that all of the paintings were exhibited as though the viewer were actually walking through the monastery of Mount Saint Catherine (in the Sinai desert) and seeing them for the first time. They were exhibited, physically and contextually, as articles of devotion and not just pieces of art. Originally intended to promulgate piety, these icons (images) were displayed as devotional art for a distinctly devotional purpose.

Catholics can learn important lessons from this iconic exhibit. Like *Holy Image / Sacred Ground*, our lives are works of art that are intended to be properly and piously exhibited before the world. We Christians are God’s workmanship (Eph. 2:10)! But how can we curate, properly exhibit, our Christ-centered Catholic piety? At least four priorities are pertinent.

Catholic Piety is Canonical. Catholic identity is grounded within a unique framework that celebrates Scripture and Tradition. To Catholics, both are important. So many people today are both biblically ignorant and biblically illiterate. Fifty years ago, I could go onto any American street corner, cite an obscure biblical passage, and almost every person would be able to broadly discuss the passage I was referencing. Although not everyone would have been a believer in Jesus Christ, almost everyone would have been able to understand and broadly discuss a passage of Scripture. They broadly knew the Bible, even if they did not subscribe to its inspiration and expectations. Now, fifty years later, I can enter many college classrooms, focusing specifically upon the Western Literary Canon, and many Professors and students will be ignorant (and thus illiterate) about the debt of gratitude literature owes to the Bible.

Sadly, this illiteracy is evident in many churches today. Many Catholics have not read the Bible. Many Catholics do not know what the Bible teaches, or about its history, importance or imperative for piety. The translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible, St. Jerome, once wrote that ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ. If his assertion is accurate, there are many Christians who are ignorant of Christ. They do not know their Bibles and, as such, do not know Jesus in the manner in which he needs to be known.

Returning to our focus upon icons, icon painters often saw their paintings as writings. They did not paint icons, as much as they “wrote” icons. They were often very precise about their visual language and their artistic labor. Why did they say and do this? The reason is because they understood icon painting as an extension, a proper interpretation, of the Bible and the proper traditions of the Church. They wanted their religious images, icons, to accurately depict what God and the Church were communicating. They did not want to communicate false doctrine. They wanted accurate and accessible art that excited hearts, opened eyes and activated evangelism. Do our devotional practices, our reading and reflecting upon the Bible, demonstrate piety? Are we *demonstrating* our Bible-centered devotion in and through our private and public lives? As icons of God who are made in His image and likeness, Catholics must seek to conform ourselves to the Canon.

Catholic Piety is Creedal. Catholics embrace the three creeds. This is important to understand. While the Bible is primary, the three classic creeds provide guidelines and guardrails for us. They provide both an outline about how the historic Church has understood the faith, and how we are

to properly interpret the faith. Any interpretation of Scripture will not do! Not any interpretation of Scripture is accurate and acceptable! The creeds were originally written to define us, determine fellowship, and defend against error. They still serve that purpose, and are literary, liturgical and artistic masterpieces.

Icon painters did not write their icons freehand or freestyle. They did not make it up as they pleased, although they were not



crass imitators of tradition either. There were outlines, guidelines and guardrails that they needed and wanted to follow. As these painters were particularly devout in their practices, they wanted to ensure that their paintings accurately pointed to Christ, to right belief and right behavior. They did not want to mislead or deceive. As such, every line and every color mattered. This is very much in keeping with the purpose of the creeds. They keep us within the guidelines and the guardrails—much

like Bach's music exhibits tremendous freedom within limits. Without limits we do not have liberty; we have license and licentiousness. Catholics properly revere the three creeds, but are we also regularly reflecting upon them for inspiration and instruction? Catholic piety is creedal.

Catholic Piety is Catechetical. Christian iconography is visual catechesis. One of the reasons that icon painters “wrote” their icons was because so many people were illiterate. They could not read, or they could not afford Bibles and other forms of devotional literature. As such, as stated above, iconographers were very careful about what and how and why they painted their images. Images were biblical instruction. Images were theological instruction. Images did not just uplift the imagination; they sought to inform the head, elevate the heart, and engage the hands.

We are living at a time when catechesis is increasingly important. It is not just the non-Christian who does not know about the Bible, and about basic Bible beliefs and behaviors. Many Christians, including Catholics, have no idea about what to believe, why we believe and how we behave. One great legacy of the Church is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It is central. It is critical. We should and we must celebrate it! But, as well, we should consistently consider and conform ourselves to it. Catholic piety, like Christian iconography, understands that we are all in need of ready and reliable reminders about what is essential and what is not essential. Catechesis is essential, framing and forming Catholic character.

Catholic Piety is Critical. Christian Philosopher, Francis A. Schaeffer, has noted that the arts are at the cutting edge of philosophy and theology. This is evidenced repeatedly across almost every artistic line.

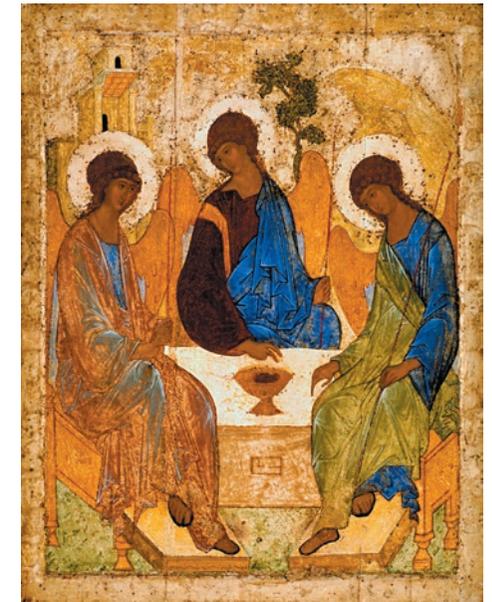
Every major artistic movement over the past one hundred and fifty years—including, as only two examples, the liturgical and ecumenical movements—has shaped (for good or for ill) contemporary consciousness and life. Sadly, simply by examining contemporary art and culture (and these at times within the Church), the impact of the arts has often been destructive—not constructive.

In many ways, although the arts have received a great deal of attention over the past forty years, we live in an iconoclastic era. That is, we live in an age and within a culture where breaking things—rules, norms, historic understandings, values, traditions—is not only tolerated, but is celebrated and encouraged. Simply look at how the word “love” has been destructively deployed to accommodate a multitude of questionable beliefs and behaviors! We live in an age of despairing destruction.

Catholics are not iconoclasts. We never have been. We do not value breaking things, but do enjoy building things. Cosmos, not chaos, is celebrated—and this in every part of a truly Catholic culture. Our public worship is a perfect example of this. The Mass, properly understood and appreciated, exhibits visual and verbal artistry of the highest caliber. It is Arts in action! Within our Catholic tradition there is a healthy and hopeful perspective on the Arts and its ability to engage and change culture. Arts can—and are intended to—change each of us.

In Tarkovsky's 1966 classic film *Andrei Rublev*, broadly based upon the iconographer of the same name, we see everything is filmed in black and white. The entire three-plus-hour film is in black and white until the final scene when Rublev's “Hospitality of Abraham” (also erroneously called the “Holy Trinity Icon”) is depicted in bold and

bright colors. After over six hundred years, and in spite of its cracking with age, it still shines! We, like icons, are intended to shine with the image of God to a watching world. We, like this icon, are intended to disclose the sacramental qualities of God to a dead and dying world. It is the faithful Catholic who, by the grace of God in Christ by the Holy Spirit, lends bold and bright color to a black and white world. Are we doing so? Are we curating Catholic piety? ✘



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Saint John Bosco

Text and illustrations by
VICTORIA SHERIDAN, OBL.OSB

SIX MONTHS INTO HIS PRIESTHOOD, JOHN BOSCO WAS quieting himself in the sacristy before mass, when he heard odd thumping and shuffling noises. He peered into the next room, to find a ragged boy bumping into furniture trying to avoid being cracked on the shins by an angry broom-wielding sacristan.

“What are you doing with that broom?” the young priest asked the sacristan.

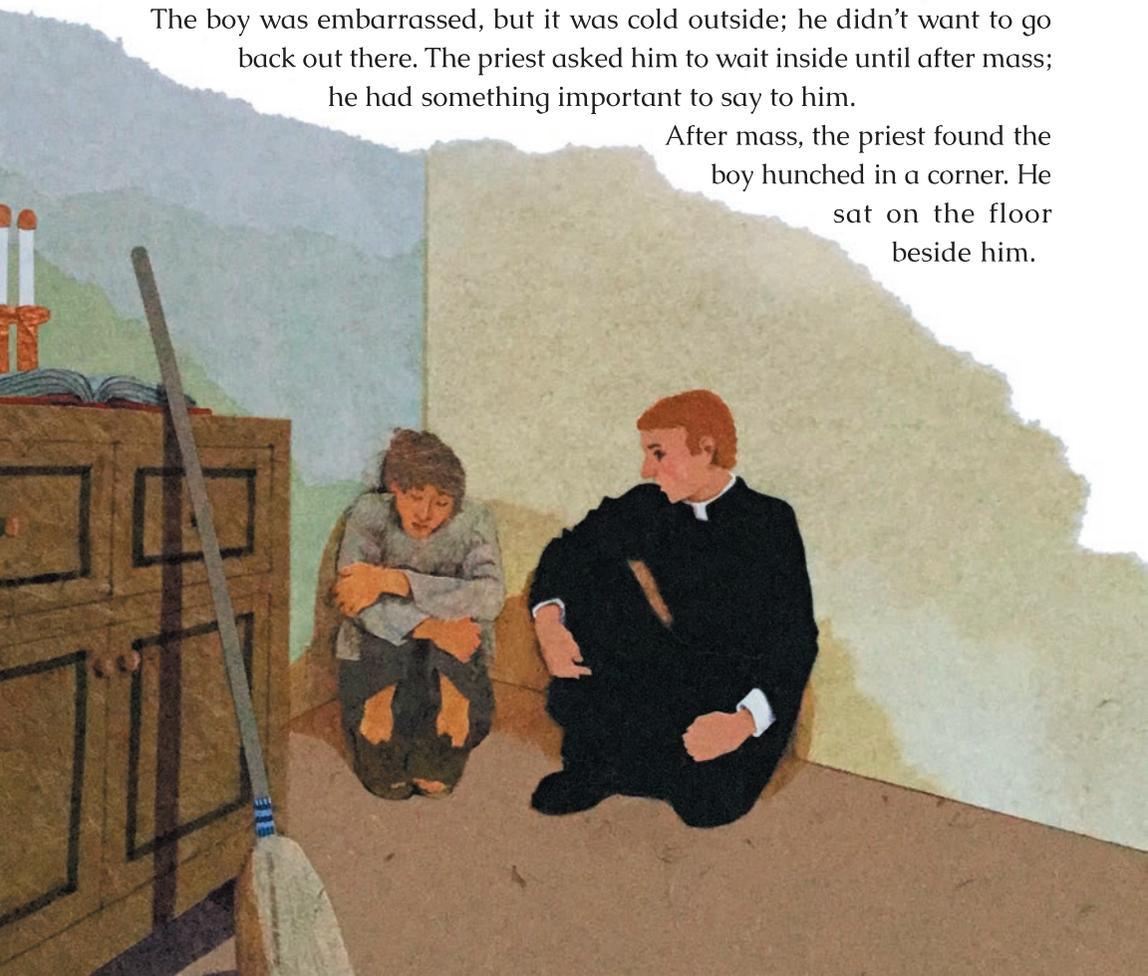
“I am getting this young hoodlum out of my sacristy!”

“That boy is a friend of mine.”

“He’s your friend...?” The sacristan’s voice faded away. He mumbled something and huffed out.

The boy was embarrassed, but it was cold outside; he didn’t want to go back out there. The priest asked him to wait inside until after mass; he had something important to say to him.

After mass, the priest found the boy hunched in a corner. He sat on the floor beside him.



“What is your name?”

“Bartholomew Garelli.”

“Where are your parents?”

“Both dead.”

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Do you know how to read and write?”

“No.”

“Can you whistle?”

“Yes!”

“That’s good. Have you made your First Communion?”

“Not yet.”

“Do you go to Religious studies classes?”

“No, and I don’t want to. The younger boys would make fun of me.”

“What if you could come alone, just you and me? Would you be interested then?”

“Yes.”

“Here in this church?”

“Yes, as long as no one chases me with a broom.”

“Nobody will dare to do that, because now you are my friend. When shall we start?”

“Whenever you think is good.”

“Then we will start this week.”

John Bosco got on his knees and thanked Jesus and his blessed Mother. The mission for which he had prepared since he was nine years old began that day.

WHEN JOHN WAS NINE, HE received his first dream from God,

which he remembered and followed all his life. By the light of this dream he could see beyond the scrap of farm he came from, to a joyful career in the service of the Most High. In the dream, he was surrounded by many children playing. Some of the boys were cursing, and young John was so shocked at their language that he jumped into their midst, swinging his fists and yelling at them to stop. A noble and imposing man told John to make himself leader of these boys. He explained that he was not to resort to force, but use kindness and gentleness. “Begin right now,” he said, “to show them that sin is ugly and virtue is beautiful.” “How?” the boy asked, confused.

The Man introduced a majestic Lady who said, “Observe.” When he turned again to the children, they had vanished; they had been replaced by animals: goats, dogs, cats, bears, and many others. “This is your field where you will work. Make yourself humble, steadfast, and strong. And what happens to these animals you will do for my children.” He looked again, and the animals had turned into lambs, frolicking together happily.

He woke up and described the dream to his family. His mother fixed her gaze on him, wondering. What could this mean for a poor, fatherless farm boy? Maybe he would become a priest. If the dream was from God, God would make it happen. She encouraged John to study hard, and to love Jesus and the Church. Though she would have liked his help with farm



work, she allowed him to go away to school. He must have an education.

His mother's guess was correct. Don John Bosco ("Don" is the Italian title for a priest) went to live in Turin, a large city where homeless boys roamed the streets, picking pockets, picking fights, living harsh lives, and dying young. And there were factory boys who worked fourteen-hour days under relentless masters. Nobody looked to their schooling; nobody seemed to care what happened to them. But John cared. Though later he was granted many other dreams, that first one stayed before his eyes, of hard-eyed boys with rough language, and a Man and a Lady who had joy to give them.

At first, John attracted street boys with street theater. He juggled; he walked a tightrope; he did acrobatic feats. In the middle of his performance he would stop to preach a brief sermon about the joys of a holy life, and afterwards finish his act. He was a natural showman; his audience was willing to listen to his message and wait for the rest of the show. When it was over, he talked with the boys, and invited them to join him on Sundays for a hike to the countryside to play games and pray and learn. He called this Sunday outing "The Oratory" – "the prayer place."

After several months, so many boys had joined his Sunday walking Oratory, that Don John found a building for their meetings. A few boys arrived to live there, then more, and more. They had to move several times because by 1846, there were no fewer than 400 boys under his care. For many of them this was the first real home they had ever known. Don John loved each of his boys. He took them all seriously; he treated them kindly; and they loved him.

But there were those who did not love John Bosco. Neighbors feared that the priest had invited a noisy crowd of young muggers and thieves into their midst. To some prominent politicians it looked as though Don John was training revolutionaries. An anti-Catholic society in Italy considered him a threat to its power. Besides those, there were the ordinary thugs who thought that because he took care of so many people, he must keep a stash of money. He faced danger from many sides.

On a dark evening in 1852 Don John was walking home

to the Oratory, and his route led through a part of town known as a haunt for criminals. As he passed along, deep in thought, he was startled when a huge grey dog bounded out from nowhere and trotted by his side. This was odd, but he was accustomed to giving strangers the benefit of the doubt, so he accepted canine strangers too. The dog seemed friendly, so he welcomed its company and they walked all the way together. As soon as they reached the Oratory, the dog turned around and headed back to where it came from.

Don John called the dog Grigio, which means Grey.

From then on, whenever he had to pass through uncertain streets, this strange guardian dog popped up to travel with him.

ONE EVENING HE WAS ON HIS WAY HOME ALONE WHEN HE noticed two men pacing the road ahead of him, furtively glancing in his direction and matching their speed to his. Suspecting that they meant him harm, he crossed the street. They crossed also. He broke into a run. He was a fast runner, but they caught him. One threw a coat over his head; the other jammed a handkerchief into his mouth. He tried to shout, but no sound came out. He struggled with all his strength. "They are going to kill me," he thought. "God save me!"

Then, with a roar, Grigio charged into the scene.

He hurled himself upon the men, knocking them sideways. He seized one man's throat in his jaws. He snarled at the other man. They



had to let go of Don John to fend off the dog. Soon both attackers were on the ground, and Grigio was standing over them, teeth shining in the lamplight, growling ferociously.

"Call off your dog!" There was terror in their voices.

"I will," said the priest, "but next time leave strangers alone."

"I beg you, call him off!"

"Down, Grigio!" The dog released them, and the two men raced away. Grigio stopped barking and turned tamely to Don John, who laughed in relief. He dusted himself off, ruffled Grigio's fur, and said, "I don't think those ruffians will bother me again!" Don John and Grigio strode back to the Oratory together. As soon as the priest was safe inside, the dog disappeared.

ON ANOTHER DAY DON JOHN WAS DOING PAPER-work in the house with his mother. Around noon, Grigio barked to be let inside the house. It was an unusual request; the dog generally stayed outside. But Don John's mother was glad to welcome him inside, and he curled himself up close to the door. There he rested all day. Toward evening the priest stood up and said he had to go out on some important business. "It is not a good idea to go out now, John," said his mother. But he insisted that the task needed to be done. As he went to push the door open, the dog laid himself across the doorway and growled when he attempted to pass. The priest tried again, but again, "Grr-rr". He waited, and then tried several times more, but at each touch of his foot to the threshold the dog snarled and refused to let him pass. "Listen to the dog," said his mother, "he has more sense than you."

Fifteen minutes later, as Don John sat wondering when he could get out to take care of his business, a neighbor ran in without knocking. "Don John! Don't go out tonight! I heard some men plotting; they plan to kill you this very night!" Grigio snorted in his sleep.

EVENTUALLY THE POLITICAL SITUATION SHIFTED, and John Bosco was no longer in danger. After that time, he noticed that Grigio no longer waited by the road for him.

Years passed. Don Bosco's first boys grew into men of character. New boys came into the Oratory; new leaders were trained. His ministry expanded and thrived.

ONE EVENING IN 1866 DON JOHN TOOK A WALK TO visit an old friend in the country. He had been invited to dinner, but had work to do before setting out, and by the time he got on the road the sun had almost disappeared. As he walked along the unlit road, he remembered that at one of the neighboring farms two fierce dogs kept guard. He had not seen Grigio for years now, but he wished his companion dog were here with him.

At that moment, a large grey dog bounded joyfully up beside him. After all this time, Grigio!

As they approached his friend's farm, they also drew closer to where the fearsome guard dogs lived. And then closer still. Suddenly Don John heard a snarl; out of the darkness he saw two sets of gleaming eyes. Grigio, stationing himself in front of Don John, growled a warning and glowered at his foes like a lion. Little by little he advanced toward them. At first they resisted, but as he paced ever nearer, they backed up. Their growls rose to a higher key. They waited for a moment in doubt, but then quietly turned around and slunk into the evening. Grigio waited until they had disappeared, and then trotted back to Don John, wagging his tail.

In a few minutes Don John reached his destination, and his host greeted him warmly. But what was this magnificent dog? Father John described how many times Grigio had rescued him, and how he seemed to appear out of nowhere when he was needed. The two men wondered over the mysteries of God, and then sat down to dinner, with Grigio lying on the floor close by. Partway through the meal, Don John got up to offer a bit of food to Grigio, but the dog was nowhere to be found.

AND THAT WAS HOW GRIGIO FINISHED HIS JOB AS Don John Bosco's companion and protector. The man never saw the dog again.

But perhaps there were times when the dog saw the man.





EPILOGUE

JOHN BOSCO DIED IN 1888, AND WAS BURIED IN TURIN. IN 1934 he was declared a saint. Even long after his death people loved him and wanted to be close to him. In 1959 Pope John XXIII had the casket with his body in it brought to Rome so that many people could honor him. When the time in Rome was finished, the casket was to be returned to Turin. On the way back, they made a stop at the city of La Spezia, where the brothers of Don Bosco's society could pay homage to his body without competing with crowds of tourists. Of course, the people of La Spezia found out, and by the time the van arrived with the casket, townspeople were there waiting, along with the brothers.

A large, grey, wolfish-looking dog also appeared. One of the brothers got a stick and tried to drive it away, but the dog showed up on another street corner and approached a more dog-loving brother, who petted him. They waited together. Then the van arrived and Saint John Bosco's casket was moved into the church. The dog followed the casket wherever it went. Despite efforts to keep him out, the dog got into the church and lay directly under the casket, refusing to move.

The dog-loving brother joked that the dog was Grigio, nearly 100 years after his last visit with Don Bosco. So they allowed the dog to sit under the casket. He sat patiently there all day, friendly with bouncy small boys, but growling when people tried to touch the casket without authorization.

At lunchtime, the dog followed the brothers to their luncheon, but refused all food, sitting quietly in a corner. He played with schoolboys and some of the younger brothers, but then disappeared. He was later found in the church, lying under the casket, though the church had been locked.

When the van with the casket finally drove away, the dog followed it until the third turn, after which he disappeared, and was never seen again. ✖

VICTORIA SHERIDAN is an oblate of St. Andrew's Abbey. She studied art in college, and in the back of her mind always thought she would like to illustrate children's books. After life's interventions and postponements, she has produced her first children's book, of which this is an excerpt. The Chronicle has been blessed by having several of her chapters and illustrations grace its pages since 2019.



BOOK REVIEW

MARY KAUFFMAN, OBL.OSB

FROM FIRE BY WATER:
My Journey to the Catholic Faith
 Sohrab Ahmari

“Tolle lege, tolle lege”

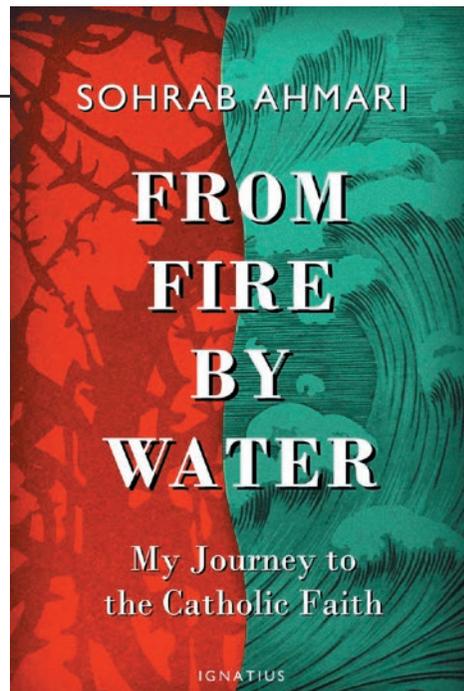
(“Take up and read, take up and read”)— words St Augustine heard spoken in a garden and recognized as God’s direction to him.

“When I found (God’s) words, I devoured them; they became my joy and the happiness of my heart...” (Jeremiah 15:16)

“When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” (1 Corinthians 13: 11)

“...the Spirit often reveals what is better to the younger.” (RB chapter 3)

FROM FIRE BY WATER TELLS A story as old as Augustine’s, as contemporary as Merton’s, as freshly in the future as a baby born today. It is a coming-of-age tale that unfolds in the life of every seeker of meaning. In this particular story, the seeker is Iranian-born Sohrab Ahmari, a columnist, editor, and author. He is currently the op-ed editor of the *New York Post* and a contributor to various Catholic and Christian publications. His personal tale highlights the formative influences of culture, peers, environment, family politics, and academic sway; but ultimately he encounters that which responds to his inner yearning and fills the emptiness that is not acknowledged until his heart is ready: Roman Catholicism. He narrates this autobiography in elegant prose with tough self-awareness and honesty about his own



weaknesses and failures, and with an organizational discipline that allows the reader to clearly follow the sometimes-cluttered road that led to his conversion.

Recent Iranian and Middle Eastern events are woven into this tale, so the reader gets a dose of geopolitical history, as well as an emphasis on the powerful influence both environment and reading can have on impressionable young minds. The power of books in particular stand out as a crucial element in this young man’s growth.

Born in 1985, not long after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 brought the ayatollahs to power, Ahmari gives readers interesting perspectives on not just his own family life but also conditions in Iran at that transitional time. He describes the default modes of life in the Islamic Republic of Iran as “rage and nostalgia.” His parents, like many adults at that time, paid public homage to the regime but lived their pre-revolution semi-Western liberal lifestyle privately as much as possible. One particular grandparent struck the young Ahmari as an example of those who

taking up slogans and ideologies with no real understanding of their effects in reality; his grandfather imbibed the ideas of the ’79 revolution that eventually took away all he had worked for and diminished all their lives — a strong lesson for the boy that “Ideas have consequences.”

As a precocious child who began pondering the world around him at a very young age, he became completely enamored with Hollywood and comic book heroes garnered from the black market, seeing them as examples of strong, problem-solving Westerners vs the fatalistic Iranian mindset that encouraged self-destructing suicide bombers. He yearns to go to America. He was also becoming aware of his conscience: a particular sixth-grade incident he participated in still bothers him as an adult, as he knew it was wrong but gave in to the temptation to impress his peers — and what discerning reader has not stored at least one such experience in his or her heart’s cave?

Eventually Ahmari and his mother — his parents are divorced — make it to America to live with an uncle who has a home in the town of Eden, Utah. In spite of its name, it is not quite the American Paradise Ahmari had envisioned; this clash between the ideal and the reality of life in America leads to a disillusionment manifested in new rebellions fueled by the ignorance of adolescence and the attraction of other alienated youth. Ahmari says he was “drifting toward a life of permanent adolescence. What saved me from that fate was reading.”

He knew he needed to read. He made a list of atheist, nihilist, existentialist authors, the ideologies to which he felt drawn. He began his self-education with Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “I consumed Zarathustra, and it consumed me in turn...” Throughout his college years, where he majored in philosophy, he went through and embraced in turn the materialistic philosophies of Existentialism, Marxism, Freudianism, and

Post-modernism. He considered himself an atheist and joined radical Marxist cells but grew disillusioned with the hypocrisy of those in the groups. As he was growing into a young adult, he “became insufferably self-righteous,” cool and countercultural. He still believed in the Marxist historical idea that “nothing was true for all times for all people,” that all could be historicized, one of his many ideas that was later refuted by his Catholicism.

A first moment of internal awakening came within a touch of ironic humor: while at his first college in Utah, he roomed with two Mormon young men. In his arrogance and need to rebel against any status-quo, he did what he could to taunt and annoy his roommates: he smoked near their rooms, played loud rock music, left bottles of alcohol around the living room, and occasionally placed pornographic material where he knew they’d see it — everything he knew Mormons were against. The young men remained friendly, calm, and unflappable. However, one day when Ahmari was bored and alone in the flat, the only book near at hand belonged to the Mormons — a KJV Bible left out on a table. He picked it up and began reading; he read though the entire Gospel of Matthew at one sitting and was profoundly moved by the description of The Passion. He sat and wept at the story of this man, Christ, who though innocent could endure so much without cursing those who tormented him. Christ’s attitude and example completely nullified all the materialistic ideas Ahmari cherished. Though not yet his time of conversion, the experience opened a door for him and caused him to more deeply examine his ideas that had consequences.

As he passed through even more stages of struggling with secular ideas, from the Beat poets (who had “transfigured their debauchery into an authentic style”) to a libertine life of partying, drinking, and casual hook-ups, he began to find materialism intellectually stifling; he also became disgusted with himself

and the way he was leading his life. His first job out of college was teaching in an elementary school, where a fellow teacher's example, a teacher who went against the modern grain and administration wishes to do what was right for the students, gave him a moral education and caused him to think that "maybe there were permanent things about what made all people tick."

Three almost synchronous life events cause him to become aware of his dark, self-destructive behavior. Feeling lost, he happens by a church while he is out walking and decides to go in; Mass is about to start. What he experiences there touches his soul deeply, and his "emotions and imagination had assented to faith."

He will eventually find his true home in Catholicism, in part through reading Catholic authors and through the beauty of a Catholic Mass. As he says of an experience in Brompton Oratory in London, "This was a holy place, set apart from the banality and corruption of human affairs... Its beauty was the work of human hands yet transcendent in effect. Here beauty paid an enduring homage to the theological precepts that inspired and preceded it. And if metalwork and masonry and painting directed my imagination to spiritual realities, was that not because Almighty God has blessed me with a receptive imagination in the first place?" He notes particularly that proof to him of the Real Presence in the Eucharist was the priest's reverence at Consecration as well as the reverential attitudes of the recipients of the Eucharist. This impacted him more than any theological discourse.

There are many interesting and enlightening side-trips throughout the book. One involves his experience as an under-cover journalist joining a group of migrants who are waiting to be smuggled into Turkey. It also gives glimpses into different Middle Eastern cultures from a first-hand lived perspective. But on the whole, this is a well-written autobiography that pulls us into the youthful

angst and sometimes desperate searching that can be a significant part of growing up.

Wherever your own journey to adulthood in terms of faith and politics took you, you will find this autobiography a compelling account of one man's growth into adulthood and the influences that environments have on all of us. It reminds us to be patient with the youth who search and have concern for those who no longer search due to the continual mindless distractions of our culture. Our responsibility as adults is to ensure that young people, but especially those in their teens, are exposed to what is best in terms of intellect, spirit, goodness, and beauty. What we take in through our senses has a great impact on our souls, and the modern young mind will respond to both the inanity of much of the media and the impact of the well-told truth-filled story. We should stay aware of that critical lifetime when mind and heart are most susceptible to growth and change; remember and reflect on our own youthful searching and reaching and never give up leading the young to the truth: an open soul will recognize the truth and respond by grasping it to itself.

Cradle Catholics can easily take our faith for granted; reading these stories of the struggles and impediments that many must overcome to join the church helps us see the beauty and fullness of our faith with fresh eyes, the eyes of the adult convert. The examples of priests and of the Catholics in church were part of Ahmari's conversion process; remember that our personal actions represent universal "Catholic" to many onlookers.

What are you taking into your own mind and heart? Is it of value, or is it distracting noise? Does it help growth, or does it distort?

Question: If you are reading good books, books of fiction and nonfiction that address the eternal verities of humanity, are you aware of the ways they change you? If you are not reading good books, books that have beauty and can touch your soul, why not?

Tolle lege. ✠

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