

homiletic & pastoral review

NOVEMBER 1984

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Publisher

Catholic Polls, Inc.

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Homiletic & Pastoral Review is

owned and published by

Catholic Polls, Inc., 86 Riverside
Dr., New York, N.Y. 10024.

Editor, Kenneth Baker.

Telephone: (212) 799-2600, HPR

appears monthly, except bi-

monthly for August-September,

and is available on Microfilm

through Xerox University

Microfilms, Inc., 300 North

Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, Mich.

48106. Second class postage paid

for at New York, N.Y. and at

additional offices. © Catholic

Polls, Inc. 1984.

Address all correspondence to

Kenneth Baker, S.J.,

86 Riverside Drive,

New York, N.Y. 10024.

Rates: U.S. and Possessions—

\$18.00 per year; \$33 for two years.

For foreign postage, add \$4.00 per

year. Single copies available at \$2.00

per copy postpaid.

Foreign currency accepted.

Postmaster. Send Form 3579 to HPR,

86 Riverside Drive, New York, N.Y.

10024.

Publication No. USPS 889-740

ISSN No. 0018-4268

Volume LXXXV, No. 2

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—Editorial

The specific factor which underlies contemporary Neo-Gnosticism is the acceptance of pseudosexual behavior in practice and the attempt to justify it in theory.

Turmoil in the Church

By Germain Grisez

■ Twenty-six years ago, in 1958, Pius XII died, but the Church seemed to be quite healthy. Pope Pius had done many progressive things and he had kept the ship on course. He died respected, admired, and loved.

In 1958 most Catholics realized that while one cannot do anything without God's grace, with it one can and must overcome sin and strive for holiness, prepare oneself for death and everlasting life. Of course, not everybody in the Church lived up to her moral teaching, even in respect to grave matters, but when they did not, they admitted themselves to be sinners.

Thus, traditional Christian moral norms were unquestioned by most Catholics, despite their rejection by many people outside the Church. Again, within the church, dogmas—such as those concerning original sin, the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus, his bodily presence in the Eucharist, and bodily resurrection—were unquestioned.

Today, many Catholics, including

Pope John Paul II and most bishops, still hold and try to live by and hand on all of these sacred truths and realities. But some bishops, many intellectuals, priests, and religious, and part of the ordinary faithful (more or less in different places and among different socio-economic groups) have abandoned traditional Catholic moral teaching and adopted the subjectivism of following one's own so-called conscience. Many think that sin is inevitable but that an indulgent God will save everyone. Many sophisticated Catholics question elements of dogma which involve bodily reality and historical facts.

What confronts us is not simply a large number of unrelated mistakes and aberrations, but a systematic alternative to Catholic faith and life. The particular elements are symptoms or, better, parts of a larger, unified process of spiritual pathology.

This process has emerged and run its course repeatedly in Christian history. One finds evidence of its first occurrence

in the later writings of the New Testament—the Johannine literature and books such as 2 Peter, the Timothy's, and James—all of which attack this pathology.

What is the underlying process? It has had various names—Gnosticism, Albigensianism, and so forth—with many small and some important mutations. But through its metamorphoses, the pathology we are experiencing remains recognizable and it can be explained fairly easily. The current strain can be called “Neo-Gnosticism.”

Salvation is presumed

Neo-Gnosticism involves many elements, some of which are peculiar to it. For example, whereas ancient Gnosticism confused evil with materiality and posited a bad god or subdivine cause to account for the material world, Neo-Gnosticism confuses evil with the immaturity inevitably involved in gradual evolution. Again, whereas Gnosticism perverted natural sciences, such as astronomy, to provide the pseudoscientific elements of its world view, such as astrology, Neo-Gnosticism draws upon psychology and sociology to construct pseudospirituality, pseudopastoral programs, and so forth.

The more central elements of Neo-Gnosticism, including several already mentioned, are the following: (1) rejection in practice of received Christian moral teaching, especially absolutes in the area of sex morality; (2) denial that ordinary Christians really can live pure and holy lives; (3) assertion that God's grace and mercy is such that all who share the Neo-Gnostic outlook and attitude will be saved, while those who reject Neo-Gnosticism are in danger; (4) rein-

terpretation of all the elements of dogma which turn on bodiliness and historical fact to reduce them to merely symbolic status; (5) with this reduction, denial that the words of scripture and defined doctrine have permanent and binding significance; (6) identification of revelation and faith with some ineffable inner experience, spiritual encounter, or metaphysical factor, which cannot be encapsulated in human formulae; and (7) rejection of the fact and/or the significance of the pope and other bishops as successors of the apostles.

I believe there is a single key to the pathological process of the present outbreak of Neo-Gnosticism. No doubt, many factors contribute to this disease. If someone comes down with lung cancer, there are many contributing factors; other people are exposed to the disease agent but do not contract the disease. But there has to be some specific factor which explains each specific disease. I believe the specific factor which underlies contemporary Neo-Gnosticism is the acceptance of pseudosexual behavior in practice and the attempt to justify such behavior in theory.

By “pseudosexual behavior” I mean all those kinds of genital arousal, whether short of or to orgasm, which are engaged in for mere amusement, pleasure, distraction, or release of tension. Pseudosexual behavior must be contrasted with authentic sexual behavior, which carries out a real marital commitment in a common life, in which sexual intercourse is both truly love-giving and open to new life.

In marriage, genital acts shared by the couple can integrate those who engage in them; they can bring together bodily performance, feeling, satisfaction, and moral commitment in view of the real

contribution such acts make to the authentic personal and interpersonal goods of marital friendship, new life, and the sacrament.

But genital acts outside marriage—and even those within it deprived of their full meaning by masturbatory attitudes and/or the use of contraceptives—do not integrate the personality. Instead, they give rise to a real inner tension which is far more serious than the experience of sexual tension they are meant to remedy.

This point needs to be spelled out a bit. Consider the simplest case, that of the masturbating adolescent. Sexual arousal and release is a fascinating experience in itself; it is initiated without intelligible purpose and is entirely cut off from real communication with other people. In this experience, the body functions as object and tool to provide satisfaction for the highly self-conscious subject. One could think of and cite many vulgar expressions which make this point clear, for people often refer to the genitals as objects and tools, as non-self and infrapersonal.

Society: You decide what's good

Those who accept pseudosex as part of their life style tend to shrink reality to the subject-object relationship. Everything is either an object which impinges on consciousness in desirable or undesirable ways, or is consciousness itself—the self-enclosed world of subjectivity. In other words, all that is real is my self-conscious self together with those things which affect the state of my consciousness.

Pseudosexual practices involving other persons—premarital sex play, homosexual relations, and selfish and sterilized intercourse in marriage—are more com-

plex than the behavior of the masturbating adolescent. However, all pseudosexual behavior involves a masturbatory component and insofar as it does has the same disintegrating and reductionistic tendencies as masturbation.

Contemporary, developed, urban-industrial cultures accept pseudosexual behavior as normal. Together with liquor, other drugs, contemporary music, television entertainment, and so on, pseudosexual behavior serves as a distraction from the serious distortions of these cultures.

The motivations involved in pseudosexual behavior are also useful for manipulating masses of people—for example, by advertising and other uses of the mass media. Thus, we have modern materialism, the “sensate culture” or “consumer society,” in which nothing seems real or important except how one feels and the things, including one’s own body, which make one feel good or bad.

The materialist society and the prevalence of pseudosex in it did not develop in the past twenty-five years, though they have intensified greatly in the advanced, Western countries during this period. However, Catholics generally used to recognize the alien character of this culture and only recently have many surrendered to it.

In this connection, one must bear in mind the difference between committing sins, recognizing them as such, and repenting; and doing things which really are sins, but trying to justify them, and not repenting. The former limits the impact of sin on one’s self; the effects of the sin are blocked by repentance. But committing sin and trying to justify it integrates the sin with the self, and so enslaves the whole self to the sin.

Those who are trying to live a spiritual life—such as clerics and religious—ordinarily have a strong sense of realities beyond immediate experience. When such persons accept pseudosex and try to integrate it into their lives, they are likely to experience a temptation of faith. God and heavenly things begin to seem less real. If this temptation is resisted, another arises: to develop the self-alienation involved in pseudosex into an ideological dualism.

The real self is identified with one's spiritual self, and a new value is placed on individual subjectivity and religious experience. Community also is emphasized, but with a new attitude. Community now becomes a source of experiences to be enjoyed by individuals rather than a reality to be faithfully maintained and built up by its members. The bodily self is extruded, alienated, regarded as a mere object and instrument.

Justifying sin enslaves

Here we arrive at the heart of Neo-Gnosticism. Since on this view pseudosexual behavior does not involve the real self, it cannot be so important as to constitute mortal sin. Thus, the received moral absolutes must go. Sometimes they are retained in theory but discarded in practice by adopting an erroneous fundamental-option theory—the idea that one basically opts for God and can maintain that option despite regular, unrepented acts of sexual self-indulgence.

Because pseudosexual behavior seems a physiological function rather than a personal act, yet still causes guilt feelings, theories which lessen personal moral responsibility become appealing. Because the performances in which sins are committed do not belong to the true,



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spiritual self, the spiritual self falls back upon spiritual encounters with God, while merit for good and demerit for bad works are disregarded.

Because the body is depersonalized and alienated from the spiritual self, all the elements of Christian reality and teaching which essentially involve the body have to be reinterpreted. Thus, the transmission of original sin by inheritance, the intactness of Mary's bodily virginity, the Incarnation of the Word, his bodily resurrection and ours, his bodily presence in the Eucharist, and so

forth are now called into question. The bodily aspect is reduced to symbol.

Original sin? Not Adam's sin transmitted to us by propagation, but the sin of the world. Mary's virginity? A theologumenon. The Incarnation? Jesus is not divine, or we are all divine. Bodily resurrection? Who cares whether Jesus' corpse is lying around somewhere? Bodily presence of Christ in the Eucharist? Transignification.

Because inner, spiritual experience is what counts and because the given elements of Christian life and doctrine are being rejected, revelation now has to be changed into something ineffable—a spiritual encounter or a metaphysical factor—no longer bound to the words of Scripture and the dogmatic formulae of Catholic faith.

Christian doctrine is rejected

And because the power of the pope and other bishops to speak and act in the person of Jesus is all too incarnational and impedes the whole Neo-Gnostic program, their sacramental office must be usurped and transformed. Any theologian who effectively articulates the Neo-Gnostic consensus claims more teaching authority than the pope, and anyone—man or woman, ordained or not—accepted by some Christian community as a leader can enjoy all the powers of a bishop.

In sum, in the past twenty-six years many of the ordinary faithful, especially young people and those without deep faith, have embraced the sensate culture and lost their faith, while many of the more serious laity, religious, and clergy—including some bishops—have accepted pseudosex but tried to harmonize it with their faith, and in doing so have

more or less consciously embraced Neo-Gnosticism.

Turmoil in the Church has focused on questions of sex morality and related issues. Neither Vatican II, nor the Holy See, nor faithful bishops and theologians have been preoccupied with sex. However, those preoccupied with pseudosex have fought without letup to bring Catholic practice, teaching, and Church order into harmony with a disordered life style.

Those embracing Neo-Gnosticism need not individually have accepted pseudo-sexual practices as part of their personal life style. They need only have approved or condoned such acts and shared the ideology used to justify them by confreres, relatives, friends, penitents, subjects, or superiors who shared more directly in the sexual revolution of our time.

Moreover, many who reject Neo-Gnosticism as a whole nevertheless find certain of its elements appealing and embrace them for reasons other than their utility in rationalizing pseudosex.

But, one wonders, how could Neo-Gnosticism have emerged so rapidly and become so powerful, in some places even dominant, in the Catholic Church which seemed so healthy only twenty-six years ago? I will mention only a few of the factors which rendered the Church vulnerable to the current outbreak of this perennial pathology.

First, the surrounding culture is enslaved by pseudosex and is hard to resist. The surrounding culture offers many occasions of sin and often presents temptations in very seductive forms. The development of television entertainment after World War II contributed greatly to materialism and permissiveness; it distracted even faithful Christians from prayer and consciousness of higher

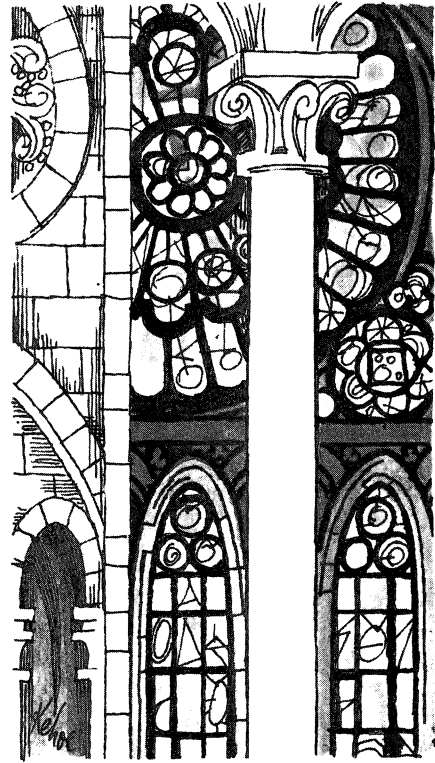
things. Prosperity also created many opportunities for sin, and terror of possible nuclear destruction intensified the desire for pleasure and diversion.

Second, the mass media have played a tremendous role in what has happened in the Catholic Church. They select and interpret what seems valuable from the point of view of unfaith and antifaith. Vatican II, for example, was deeply affected by the fact that even the bishops' own self-understanding during the Council was reached with the help of the mirror of the secular media. Moreover, the Council's documents have often been replaced by a so-called spirit of the Council which consists largely of the miasma spewed out by nonbelieving public-opinion makers.

Mass media selects, interprets

Third, political freedom, while good in itself, sets up certain stresses and temptations. Many religions exist in our society, yet none is essential. Freedom of religion means that any religion is permissible for individuals but none is necessary to society. Thus, there is a consumer mentality; whenever religious leaders talk with people, they are in a buyers' market. Hence, all religious leaders are tempted to adjust by accepting the role of marketing managers who can and must adapt not only their sales strategy but even their product to the whims of potential customers.

In this context, a sleekly packaged Neo-Gnosticism seems a more marketable product than authentic Christian faith and life. Is it not necessary to lighten the burden on the faithful? Pope John XXIII was aware of the danger posed by this temptation; he called Vatican II to develop an alternative strat-



egy—namely, the better packaging and marketing of a genuine and renewed Christian faith and life. But many ignore Vatican II's reality and instead follow a spurious "spirit of the Council" in making compromises with secular humanism.

At the same time, many religious leaders have come to think of themselves as executives or bureaucrats. They accept that social status and adopt its mentality, including manipulative methods of dealing with people, methods which manage superficial compliance instead of challenging to deep commitment. Thus, a false ideal of the "pastoral" has arisen. Its primary concern is to keep people happy by making them comfortable.

A fourth general factor which made

the Church vulnerable to Neo-Gnosticism was the social psychology of the theological profession as an academic community.

In some Western countries the world of academic theology has been dominated for many decades by liberalized Christians, who do not accept divine revelation as all Christians traditionally understood it, and so do not have authentic Christian faith. In other countries, Protestants who are really believing Christians have been very influential. For example, German scripture scholarship has been enriched by many genuinely believing Lutherans.

Many factors have contributed

After World War II, Catholic theologians began striving for excellence, which they defined in large part by qualities required for status as members of the academic profession. They were naturally tempted to substitute alien standards of performance for Catholic ones.

Hence, many gradually gave up the commitments and methods distinctive of the Catholic theologian — for instance, to interpret Scripture not only with all the tools of scholarship but also with a special fidelity to Catholic tradition, magisterium, life, and liturgy. Similarly, many Catholic moral theologians abandoned received teaching and rejected the authority of the magisterium. The outcome was that many Catholic theologians implicitly abandoned the Catholic conception of revelation and its mediation to us by the human instrumentalities of the Church.

A fifth general factor which made the Catholic Church vulnerable to Neo-Gnosticism is a weakness in classical Christian spirituality. As practices such

as burning heretics evidence, that spirituality was too focused on religion to the detriment of other human goods. As inadequate concern about science, the fine arts, and politics evidences, that spirituality was too otherworldly.

That classical spirituality tended to reduce life in this world to a mere means for reaching heaven and to reduce heaven to intellectual gazing upon God. Thus it narrowed hope to saving one's soul rather than expanding hope to embrace the whole new creation, which will include resurrection and everlasting life in a material world.

In its polemic against Christian faith, secular humanism took full advantage of this weakness in classical Christian spirituality. Yet Neo-Gnostic ideology derives much of its plausibility for Catholics from the affinity between the Neoplatonism in classical spirituality and certain aspects of modern continental European philosophy.

Sixth, the Catholic Church was vulnerable to Neo-Gnosticism because of internal weaknesses. Vatican II tried to remedy these weaknesses, but the Council's efforts often have been ignored and thus far have borne little fruit. Among these weaknesses, the following have been especially important.

(1) There has been considerable clubbiness among the clergy and shallowness in their intellectual life.

The clerical club has been more significant emotionally to many priests and bishops than their responsibilities with respect to Catholic truth and the integrity of the sacraments. Thus, it is difficult for a bishop to deal with a priest who teaches falsely or alters the rites so that they become invalid as sacraments. (It follows, of course, that bishops who do their duty despite their feelings are es-

pecially praiseworthy.)

Moreover, seminaries and seminarians too often have been satisfied with memorization, with conveying and repeating information and opinions, instead of striving for the deep truth of faith and wisdom of Christian life. Hence, even faithful priests and bishops often lack the critical ability to recognize and deal with theological sophistry.

Clerical clubbishness also is an important factor in the reaction of bishops to sometimes intemperate criticism from laity on the right. Approval from the left, reinforced by the mass media, is more welcome, for it does not challenge the false elitism of the bishops. At the same time, their fraternity-like solidarity carries the whole body of bishops to the left and makes it difficult for individual bishops to resist the general drift or to practice fraternal correction even in scandalous cases.

(2) The property and institutions of the Church are a burden. Since we have invested so much in this school system, this seminary, this bureaucracy, we must make the best of it. Despite corruption in it, we must keep it going. Jesus' teaching is that Christians must be ready to make every necessary sacrifice to fulfill their responsibilities: If your institutions offend you, close them down.

But although in some cases only drastic measures would be effective, few are ready to take them in any case. The clear-sightedness and detachment the Gospel demands are rare when it comes to the Church's institutional baggage.

(3) Another weakness is legalism—the idea and/or attitude that all the Church's standards of behavior for her members are mere rules, which need not be understood as long as they are obeyed. "Be a good Catholic; follow the

rules of Holy Mother Church"—that has a true sense, but also expresses a profound error. What we should follow are not merely the Church's rules, but the wisdom of God Incarnate in Jesus.

That wisdom has the beauty of reality. One who conforms to it conforms to the truth. But God's wisdom also has the burden of reality. Rules can be changed. The wisdom of God Incarnate is the same yesterday, today and forever; it cannot be adapted and adjusted to suit people's desires and needs in a new cultural situation. Rather, cultures should conform to it.

Gospel demands detachment

Hence legalism keeps its appeal. If the Church's teaching about marriage is a mere set of rules, then the priest, like a traffic cop, can make exceptions to untangle knotty situations. And such a role appeals to clerics who think of themselves as clever solvers of problems rather than as servants of covenant communion between God and his people.

(4) Certain authoritarian practices were common in the Church. These practices abused the sacramental offices of bishops, priests, and religious superiors. Among these practices, one of the most damaging was the substitution of discipline for teaching. This substitution became very widespread during the twentieth century.

The abuse of disciplinary authority elicited an especially negative reaction from intellectuals. They rightly judged that many genuine theological problems exist and call for authentic developments of doctrine. Frustrated in their efforts to deal openly with these problems, many participated in a movement of underground theology. Thus, up to Vatican II,

many unpublished works circulated secretly among Catholic theologians.

Underground theology developed without necessary criticism. Those who shared in it thought alike in many important respects. People who might have criticized their work were not trusted with it. The Magisterium could not be allowed to see what it would have disciplined. Thus, surreptitious theology festered until Vatican II and then erupted in a stream of publications from 1962 to about 1970.

(5) Although Trent condemned the error that God's grace relieves Christians of their responsibilities, ecclesiastical authorities facing unpleasant duties are easily tempted to excuse themselves by passing the buck to the Holy Spirit. The tendency to give in to this temptation is strengthened by bureaucratic conservatism and a false conception of prudence which always prefers inaction to action. Perhaps Pope Paul VI himself resisted this temptation, but many members of the curia and bishops around the world evidently surrendered to it after 1968.

When faithful Catholics survey the present situation of the Church, they can hardly avoid feeling downhearted. True, the pathological condition of the Church is not so acute today as it was, say, in 1968. But the disease is no less devastating. It has become chronic and we have adjusted to it.

Whenever the pope or any bishop makes it clear that his teaching is more than *pro forma*—for example, by admonishing those who hold views incompatible with it—he can expect severe criticism and even brutal personal attack.

In some places Neo-Gnosticism has become established, while genuine Ca-

tholicism survives only in a remnant. In many places, those who reject Neo-Gnosticism are pressed to condone it and are considered “uncharitable,” “lacking in openness,” and “pre-Vatican II” if they do not quietly join in a *modus vivendi* acceptable to Neo-Gnostic members of the community.

Thus, faithful Catholics are under tremendous pressure to compromise, and the inroads of Neo-Gnosticism are extremely hard to resist. So the movement continues to grow, and I do not expect to see a better situation in the Catholic Church in my lifetime. Still, there are good reasons for hope.

Pressure to compromise prevalent

First of all, since Pius IX, a more integral Christian humanism has been unfolding in the Catholic Church. Leo XIII contributed a great deal to it with his social teaching and the revival of Thomism. The work of lay movements, such as the Catholic labor movement, helped tremendously to develop a Christian humanism and lay apostolate which did not exist one hundred years ago.

The emerging lay apostolate has been strengthened by appropriate and vigorous forms of spirituality—for example, the spirituality of the Catholic action movements before Vatican II and the spirituality of *Opus Dei* and much of the Catholic charismatic renewal in the recent years.

Despite all obstacles, Vatican II, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, sketched a magnificent new vision of an authentic humanism. The goods of the kingdom, the Council teaches, are not limited to holiness and grace; they include life and truth, justice, love and peace. The secular work and the humanistic efforts of lay people

are integral to their Christian vocations and apostolates. This present life is not merely a means to reach heaven; rather, we are now cooperating in Christ's work of building up, invisibly, his kingdom, for here and now we are preparing the materials of the everlasting world we hope to live in. Day by day Christ builds his heavenly kingdom through the work of his followers on earth.

Secondly, secular humanism and Neo-Gnosticism appear to be tremendously strong, but really are very weak. Secular humanism promises a great deal, but it is increasingly clear that no form of secular humanism can deliver what it promises. Secular humanism can deliver only death and more abundant death.

Neo-Gnosticism is an unstable amalgam of pseudosex, pseudospirituality, pseudoscience, and pseudotheology. It eases the way of people who are losing their faith and abandoning their vocational commitments. But it makes no converts from unbelief; it leads to empty cradles and broken marriages, to empty seminaries and novitiates, to violated vows and broken promises.

Conflicting forms of secular humanism perhaps will eventually engage in a large-scale military conflict or go down together in a worldwide socioeconomic collapse, or both. Then Neo-Gnosticism, a cancerous process in the body of Christ, will die along with the present cultural form of the Church.

The prospect is horrible, and perhaps there is still time to prevent disaster. Mary has appeared frequently since 1800, perhaps most recently to six children in Medugorje, Yugoslavia. Her urgent message always is the same: Prayer and penance are needed to prevent disaster and foster reconciliation for humankind.

But even if the worst is to happen, that

prospect need not cause despair in those whose hope is firmly anchored in the risen Jesus. As individuals, we must in any case die soon. As for the Church, when her present cultural form sooner or later is miraculously transformed or violently destroyed, the Neo-Gnosticism of this cycle of history also will die. But the Church herself will survive and arise in a fresh cultural form, much as she survived the fall of ancient civilization.

Thirdly — and this is a great reason for hope — Catholic faith responds to the truth of the human situation, a reality everybody knows even if they refuse to admit it. We know we are free and responsible; we know we really sin and need real forgiveness. We know we are bodies, that death is an outrage to bodily persons, and that existence

Jacques Maritain

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without hope of resurrection is absurd. We know that the world is fallen and that ambitious schemes for a perfect society, by revolution or technological progress, are vain.

Our hearts are made for integral human flourishing, including but not limited to intimate friendship with God. Our hearts shall not rest until we awaken in the new Jerusalem which Jesus will bring down from heaven when he returns in glory.

Finally, when we think about the situation and prospects of the Church, we must remember that as a human reality she, Jesus' bride, is no more immune than he himself to the hard facts of the fallen human condition.

Jesus had only limited success in his

mission. He came to save the lost sheep of Israel, and his faithful effort to carry out that mission ended in his crucifixion. However, his human failure and defeat led to his resurrection, not by some power immanent in creation and history, but by God's re-creative act which Jesus' sacrifice merited.

So with the Church. She can fail and be defeated in many ways. But as the Spirit remained with Jesus through his passion and death, so Jesus and the Spirit remain with the Church in her present turmoil and through all the sufferings of her history. She will triumph with her Lord by the cross.

The Church is not a sleek vehicle, provided to whisk us to heaven as we gorge ourselves and take our rest. No, the Church is a hot, noisy, muddy forge shop. In it we pound out the selves, pound out the relationships God wants to last forever, as we live the life of good deeds he prepared for us in advance.

God is carrying out his redemptive work in a way which gives each of us a wonderful opportunity for faithfulness, for nobility, for heroic sanctity. If we are willing to accept his help, God gives us all we need — more help in harder times — to seize the opportunity he offers and make the most of it.

If it is harder to live the Christian life in our time, we should thank God for that. He is giving us an opportunity to be greater men and women and greater saints, because he is also giving us the power to meet the greater challenge. ■

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