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Strangers in a Strange Land

Living the Catholic Faith in a Post Christian World

Questions for study and discussion

CHAPTER ONE: *STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND*

1. Georges Bernanos, the great French Catholic writer, described hope as “despair overcome,” and optimism as “whistling past the graveyard.” Hope is a virtue. Optimism is an attitude. What’s the difference? See Job 13:15 (KJV), where Job, in the worst of his suffering, still insists that “Though [God] slay me, yet will I trust in him.” How can we live in hope when Catholic life faces so many challenges today? Why do we call hope a *theological* virtue?
2. The Christian faith is a global community much larger and more vigorous than the problems in any one place. What are some signs of hope and growth for the Church internationally? In the United States?
3. Why was the Supreme Court’s 2015 *Obergefell* decision so important? How does it signify other, deeper issues in our nation’s life?
4. Why does the author see Augustine as the ideal model for our times, rather than St. Benedict or some other saint? Why is the “Augustine option” the best path for living our faith in today’s America?
5. The author notes that we need to love our country as well as our Church. But our Church and our nation are two very different kinds of societies. We owe them different types of loyalty. How does this fact relate to Augustine’s distinction between the City of God and the City of Man?

CHAPTER TWO: *OF BLESSED MEMORY*

1. The phrase, “of blessed memory” (*zikhrono livrakha* in Hebrew), is a traditional Jewish phrase used in remembering a good person who is now deceased. Why would the author choose a chapter title like this in discussing elements of American history?
2. A man with amnesia loses his memory. In losing his memory, he loses his life’s “story.” In other words, he loses his *identity*. Why is remembering our nation’s history, and remembering it *honestly and accurately*, so important?
3. What is the natural law, and why is it so important to the idea of human rights?
4. Why could Catholics feel “at home” in an America that was deeply shaped by Protestant thought, belief and even prejudice?
5. Why is religious faith so vital to the success of American democracy? How does it counteract the unhealthy tendencies of democracy?

CHAPTER THREE: *WHY IT CAN'T BE LIKE IT WAS*

1. Is America in 2017 the same nation it was in 1957? Why or why not?
2. Why does the author single out the transistor and birth control pill as change agents? What kind of consequences have come from them?
3. Why does the author say that “Calvinism is branded into our national character, even for nonbelievers”? What's so distinctive about Calvinist thought? What are the good and bad results from that?
4. Nations are always changing. Change can be good or bad. Why have our nation's recent changes in sexual behavior, religious belief, demography, economic life and technology been so revolutionary? And how have they been good – and not so good?
5. Property ownership and print literacy were important ideals for the American Founders. Why would owning property or minds formed in print literacy have anything to do with sustaining a free society?

CHAPTER FOUR: *THE TOPOGRAPHY OF FLATLAND*

1. How does the Christian understanding of nature differ from the modern scientific attitude?
2. How do the Christian and modern secular definitions of “progress” differ?
3. Why does the author say that “a central fact of American life is idolatry”? Why are Americans “uniquely prone to an idolatry of progress”? Why is technology so uniquely important to American thought, compared to many other cultures?
4. How do Christian and secular meanings of words like “equality” and “dignity” differ? Why is that so important?
5. Why does the author claim that – without God – modern science, technology and consumerism tend to flatten the human spirit and lower the horizon of the human soul? Wouldn't “leveling” produce a kind of equality? And why is that a problem?

CHAPTER FIVE: *LOVE AMONG THE ELOI*

1. The author quotes Pascal Brucker who claims that, since the sexual revolution of the 1960s, “eros has the peculiarity of making love calculable and subjecting it to the power of mathematics.” Why would that be bad? Is the love between a man and woman (sexual and otherwise) a commodity that can be measured? And is sexual intimacy a matter of numbers and technique?

2. Why would American culture and religion subtly *encourage* marriage and family breakup?
3. Why was America so prone to the sexual revolution, despite its Puritan heritage? And why is it so open to same-sex, transgender and similar sex-related issues today, despite the many Americans who describe themselves as Christian?
4. Why does the author say that “the sexual revolution, for all its talk of freedom, has a distinctly totalitarian undercurrent”? Aren’t love without commitments and sex without possessiveness the *opposite* of totalitarian? Why does the novel *Brave New World*, not *1984*, speak best to our time?
5. Why does the author say that our “choices don't stay buried”? What lesson does he want us to draw from the tale of the Eloi and Morlocks?

CHAPTER SIX: *NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH*

1. What does “doublethink” mean? Who invented the word? Why does the philosopher Justin McBrayer see it in the public education of his children? Why does he find it troubling?
2. What does the word “virtue” mean? Faith, hope, charity, justice, mercy – all these are Christian virtues. Is *tolerance* a Christian virtue? Can tolerance ever work against truth, and if so, how?
3. Why is truth vital to our ideas of beauty and goodness? Can we do good by lying? Can a system based on lies create enduring beauty? Can truth change? Can some things be true for one culture but not another? Can an action like stealing or infidelity or abortion be morally acceptable for some people or cultures, but evil for others?
4. How do polling, public relations and the mass media shape the American public's understanding of what is true? Examples? Consequences?
5. How do persons become “people of the lie”? And what does that do to the character and institutions of a nation?

CHAPTER SEVEN: *DARKNESS AT NOON*

1. The Enlightenment (17th and 18th centuries) shaped much of our modern world. Is it fair to argue that the “Enlightenment,” in some ways, led to a *darkening* of the human intellect and moral sense?
2. In Alasdair MacIntyre's view, what are the “three chronic [negative] patterns in our public life”? Why do they feed “a spirit of indignation and victimhood across the culture”? And what does that spirit do to our public discourse, shared national identity and goals, and politics?

3. For the author, what are the five major features of today's U.S. culture? How have they helped to create our current environment and problems?
4. Enlightenment thinkers wanted to keep a Christian-like morality but strip it of “superstition” and base it exclusively on human reason. Why doesn't that work?
5. Like the French Revolution, the big murder ideologies of the 20th century – communism, fascism, national socialism – were all extreme fruits of the Enlightenment. In other words, they tried to recreate society and humanity itself on strictly rational, “scientific” principles. As we saw in Chapter Two, the American Founders also borrowed heavily from the Enlightenment. Why did the American experiment turn out so differently for so long? And why is it now changing?

CHAPTER EIGHT: *HOPE AND ITS DAUGHTERS*

1. Why does the author say that “candor is not an enemy of love. And real hope begins in honesty”? See John 8:32. Can we misuse truth as a weapon? See Ephesians 4:15 and 4:25. How can we balance respect for others with the duty to speak the truth?
2. Why is hope “the fruit of faith and the seed of charity”? Why would *faith* come first among the theological virtues and in the development of a mature Christian life? And why would *charity* have anything to do with our ability to hope, or the lack of it?
3. How are despair and presumption linked to the sin of pride? And why is “the cult of progress . . . the child not only of despair, but also of presumption”?
4. What do Christians mean when they talk of “providence,” and why does it undergird our capacity for hope?
5. As creatures, we use human language and imagination to describe things that are eternal, outside our human envelope of experience, and that transcend our ability to fully understand. Is heaven a “place” in the familiar sense? Wouldn't “forever” be terribly boring? How does Benedict XVI describe eternal life for the friends of God? And why would anyone long for it?

CHAPTER NINE: *RULES FOR RADICALS*

1. A number of recent American leaders have admired Saul Alinsky and used his thinking and tactics in their own careers. What are the key traits to Alinsky's methods? Can a good end ever justify an evil means to achieve it?
2. What's the source of the word “radical”? Are Alinsky's ideas and political radicalism finally *radical* enough -- or even at all? Why?

3. Who are the “poor in spirit”? What does that expression mean? Can a middle-class or wealthy person be poor in spirit? If so, how? What does poverty in spirit require?
4. How does “meek” differ from “weak”? How can the meek inherit the earth if they’re constantly crushed by the powerful?
5. What is the real meaning of purity? And how does a commitment to purity help us to enter into the fullness of the word “beatitude”? Is living the Beatitudes really possible for ordinary persons in the 21st century? If so, what does that look like?

CHAPTER TEN: *REPAIR MY HOUSE*

1. Why is Christianity “not simply a religion for individuals”? What are the differences between Catholic and Protestant understandings of (a) personal conscience, and (b) who and what the Church is, and her authority over her people?
2. What three key problems are crippling the mission of the Church in America today? Why are they problems?
3. What does the author identify as the three ways we can live out our life in the Church and our baptismal calling?
4. Why is friendship so crucial to the life and work of the Church? Is marriage finally a form of friendship? C.S. Lewis saw friendship (*philia*) as one of the “four loves,” the others being *eros* (sexual desire), *storge* (empathy) and *agape* (unselfish, God-grounded love). What is real Christian friendship -- and what does it model to a society focused on the individual self?
5. What was John Colet’s message to the bishops and Church leaders he addressed? Did they listen? What was the result? Why does the author offer no strategic plan or practical program to do what this chapter suggests: *repairing God’s house*?

CHAPTER ELEVEN: *A LETTER TO DIOGNETUS*

1. What does it mean to be “a people” instead of just a group of individuals gathered together in one place? And what does it mean to be “*the* People, not simply ‘*a*’ People, of God”? What marks would identify such a people and set them apart?
2. What were two key facts about the early Christians that distinguished them from pagan Roman culture? What kind of concrete Christian actions resulted from these two facts?
3. Modern idols no longer come as silver and gold statues. But people worship idols nonetheless in new forms. What shapes do they take in our country today?

4. Why does the author say that Christians *shouldn't and can't* withdraw from the world, “shake the dust from our feet, and retreat to the margins” for our own freedom and safety -- even in the face of contempt and persecution?

5. What does the *Letter to Diognetus* mean when it claims that Christians and their Church are the soul of the world?

CHAPTER TWELVE: *THE CITY OF MAN*

1. What does the author mean when he says that “nature is sacramental”?

2. Why is beauty so powerful in leading us to God, and what virtues does the experience of beauty draw us to? Why?

3. In quoting Josef Pieper, why does the author stress that ugly, dishonest and corrupt language becomes “an instrument of rape”?

4. In a book ultimately about hope, joy and beauty, why does the devil play any role at all?

5. What does Augustine mean when he says “my weight is my love”? Do nations have weight? How do our individual lives shape the City of Man and the soul of the world? How does the Psalmist describe the nature and predicament of man? And in the end, why does “man” – and each individual woman and man – *matter*?