

How can we live in Holiness in the World when the World is Hostile to Holiness?

There's a line in one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council that has always captured my attention. After waxing eloquent about the many ways the "world"—non-Catholic society—has benefitted the Church with troves of wisdom and knowledge, good will and its various advancements in diverse fields, the document adds this line: "Indeed, the Church admits that she has greatly profited and still profits from the antagonism of those who oppose or who persecute her."

What a strange line! How so?

Well, let's go back to our definition of holiness, or "the perfection of charity." In other words, to be holy is to share in the love that God is and in the love God has for our sinful, broken world (Jn. 3:16). Which, more concretely, means learning how to love like Jesus, hanging on the Cross and looking at his family, his friends, his betrayers, detractors, and murderers.

The "happy fault" of human malice and weakness is that it gave cause for God to love us in the most extreme measure, and so lay bare his deepest depths—God's truest character as mercy.

It is highly significant that only hours before his arrest, condemnation, torture, and execution, Jesus says to his disciples, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn. 13:35), prefacing these words by saying, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (Jn. 13:34).

This outrageous commandment contains the same divine reasoning that allowed Jesus to say the unthinkable to us: "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy" (Lk. 6:22-23). So how does Jesus imagine his disciples responding to the hostility of the world? Love, joy, mercy—so the world sees in us the Face of God.

So this is it! Christians, immersed in a vibrant community of faith that clings to Jesus Christ, formed and shaped by His teaching, nourished by prayer and sacraments, see the resistance of the world as a gift that allows us to be forged into the image of Christ. Such a world is no longer viewed simply as "the enemy to be resisted with truth," but as the neighbor to be loved in truth. As G.K. Chesterton famously said, "The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people."

In his remarkable book, *The Difference God Makes*, the late Francis Cardinal George makes an argument that sums up my point well. I will end my reflection with his words:

I mentioned earlier, I am not easy with the term "countercultural," because it sometimes connotes self-hatred. There is truth to the claim that the Catholic believer must sometimes stand boldly apart from his or her culture and speak a word of prophetic critique; but, at its limit, the claim to be countercultural strikes me as incoherent.

Whether we like it or not, we are shaped—linguistically, intellectually, relationally, bodily—by the culture in which we live. To stand completely outside of our culture is, impossibly, to stand outside of ourselves. More to the point, the language of counterculturalism can give rise to an attitude both mean-spirited and condescending. A culture is transformed only by those who love it, just as individuals are converted only by evangelizers who love them. (58)



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