

As seminarians, priests study the noteworthy philosophers and their philosophical systems. Some guys love it; some guys don't. I loved it. When I finally figured out what Plato was saying, it caused an intellectual explosion within me. The fire is still burning. I fancy myself an amateur philosopher, a "lover of wisdom." Unfortunately, although I have found the study of philosophy personally rewarding, I have not found it terribly effective in homilies. The bored and utterly unimpressed reactions I have received make me sympathetic to substitute teachers throughout the world. It's a shame because some of these philosophies can be understood from a Christian perspective and help us to enrich our lives. Perhaps, a bulletin article will prove a more effective venue. I've mined three ancient philosophical schools looking for helpful day-to-day wisdom. Those schools are: the Epicureans, the Stoics and the Skeptics.

let's
DISCUSS



In popular culture, the Epicureans tend to be associated with an immoral, hedonistic lifestyle. This is not fair. The true Epicurean advised that a person seek a moral life that produces the most continuous pleasure. For instance, they would tell you to find a career and hobbies that stimulate you, that make you want to get out of bed in the morning. Like almost all true philosophers, they would urge you to take the road less traveled, if you feel compelled to do so. Our backgrounds and family expectations can be blessings but they can also hinder us in the search for true happiness. An Epicurean would also tell you to find a worthy spouse. Your biggest life blessing can be your spouse and family. So choose your spouse wisely because a spouse can be a person's biggest cross too.

Also, to pursue the ideal continuous pleasure for you, identify the type of soul God gave you. Aristotle identified the general type of ways people find pleasure in life: (1) through fun and amusing oneself; (2) through achievement and recognition; (3) through business and gaining wealth; (4) through learning and seeking wisdom. Whatever way you find pleasure in life, seek the high end pleasures. So type one folks should consider playing chess and joining civic organizations. Type two people should always give glory to God for their talents and achievements. Type three individuals should do what's best for society and be the most philanthropic. Type four people are the rarest and most blessed. The life of prayer and study is the highest form of living on Earth. It can be done anywhere and those people use the most Divine qualities, their minds and spirits.

In a world where most of us feel stressed out, we can learn a few helpful hints from the stoics. For example, whatever you are going through right now, in ___ years you'll be dead and what's bothering you now probably won't mean a thing to you or anyone else. Yes, it's morbid. However, it's the first thing I think of when something goes wrong in the parish. It never fails to keep the situation in perspective. It's a Stoic teaching. Remember the words of St Frances de Chantal, "From the perspective of Heaven, whatever we suffer in this life will only seem like a bad night, in a bad hotel." That's really a Christian version of Stoic thought.

Stoics believed that everything in life has a proper function, from friendship to the universe. It was our job to learn those functions and live accordingly. In a similar manner, a person was to acknowledge their role in life and live it out humbly and without complaint. A Stoic lived believing Zeus assigned them these marching orders. As Christians, we believe more or less the same thing with big exceptions. We believe in a loving God, who we can respectfully moan and groan to in prayer. Like in the Psalms though, we should always end the moaning and groaning by expressing confidence that God can deliver us from the situation or situations. There are a few other techniques we can learn from the Stoics, which can help us in our day-to-day lives. Stoics believed in controlling the passions. One way we do that is by expecting the unexpected and accepting the situation as an opportunity to grow. Therefore, if something is taking longer than we expected, the Lord might want to teach us patience. If someone is rude to us, the Lord might want us to live out HIS command to turn the other cheek. Finally, the Stoics asked their followers to take a birds' eye view of their problems. Looking down from outer space on the general vicinity of Poughkeepsie, NY, this view could change how we view our life. We might see what's truly important and the ridiculousness of some of our concerns. It also should make us feel much closer to all humanity. From the advantage point of space, we look as one people, not necessarily various ethnicities, races and creeds.

In a world that doesn't embrace Catholic teaching, I think we can learn from the Skeptics too. The Skeptics accepted prevailing norms but never fully bought into them either. Many Catholics too easily accept what the world is selling. Do you accept what many Catholics and non-Catholics believe, that is, that the Church is wrong regarding the prohibition against artificial birth control, abortion and usury? Do we challenge our way of thinking? Perhaps, we consider ourselves more faithful Catholics but we have a hard time with Catholic social and economic teachings. Do we just dismiss the teachings or do we wrestle with them? When we struggle with a teaching, we are asked to give the Church the benefit of the doubt (Faith) and then use our reason to try to understand why the Church holds certain teachings. Everything the Church teaches is perfectly reasonable when viewed with Faith.

Finally, Skeptics were taught to search for anomalies in positions. Anomalies can be the most valuable part of a teaching because examining them can help a person fully understand the teaching and possibly create a paradigm shift in how others view it. I'd like to share one example regarding how that can be applied to Catholicism. Some Catholics have argued and continue to argue that in every case a baby has to be literally baptized in water to go to Heaven. Therefore, for example, in their minds, if a Catholic baby died without Baptism, that baby could not go to Heaven. The anomaly is that it doesn't seem consistent with a loving God. Also, Faith is required at a Baptism. In cases of infant Baptism, the Faith is supplied by the parents, godparents, and the Christian community. Hence, some theologians have reasoned that these babies could go to Heaven by Baptism by desire. If the baby didn't in his or her heart desire Baptism, then certainly one of its parents, grandparents, potential Godparents or some faithful member of humanity did. Therefore, it's reasonable to believe that the baby could go to Heaven. I would hope so, and so does the Church. I would argue, thinking skeptically, that a skeptical person can be a thinking Catholic in certain situations.

I hope one or more of these schools of philosophy can help you live out your Catholic Faith. In the classical world, philosophy was a way of life. Catholicism is "The Way" of life but philosophy can help enrich the journey.