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Books

Letters To a Young Catholic, by George Weigel

Reviewed by David Birch

"Catholicism is a way of seeing things, a distinctive perception of reality"

LETTERS TO A YOUNG CATHOLIC
by George Weigel
(Gracewing, 2004, 251pp, softcover, $24.95. Available from AD Books)

With the Twentieth World Youth Day in Cologne on 16-21 August, this year, scheduled to be the first overseas visit of Pope Benedict XVI, it is timely to consider the latest book from George Weigel, (perhaps best known for his Witness to Hope: The Biography of John Paul II) in which he composes 14 letters specifically aimed at young Catholics, who, like many of their older counterparts, may well be wondering what it means to be a Catholic today.

Weigel's approach towards answering that question is to take a tour of the Catholic world, composing each letter around a particular Catholic site, like the Oratory in Birmingham, St Peter's and the Sistine Chapel in Rome, the Metropolitan Curia in Kraków and Chartres Cathedral, amongst others.

Different world view

He begins with a tour of his own childhood in Baltimore in the 1950s and 60s when, as a young Catholic absorbing things as he says "by a kind of osmosis", he came to a fuller and deeper understanding of the truths of the Catholic faith.

Central to his own childhood was a very deep awareness that as a Catholic boy he was different - not simply in how he described himself, how he talked, what he wore and what he ate, and where he went to school. More importantly, what made him different from his non-Catholic peers was a fundamentally different way of seeing the world.

His first proposition, one might even say challenge, to young Catholics today is to consider that, "while Catholicism is a body of beliefs and a way of life, Catholicism is also an optic, a way of seeing things, a distinctive perception of reality" (p.10).

The question for those young people of the world travelling to Cologne in August, and perhaps even more so for those who are not travelling there, is the extent to which this view of Catholicism is as deeply embedded now for them as it was for George Weigel in the 1950s.

Citing Flannery O'Connor, a central theme throughout these letters is O'Connor's comment that, "the moral sense has been bred out of certain sections of the population, like the wings that have been bred off certain chickens to produce more white meat on them" (p. 12).

Weigel interprets this moral sense as the spiritual sensibility "which allows us to experience
the world, not as one damned thing after another but as the dramatic arena of creation, sin, redemption, and sanctification” (p.12).

This moral sense, which Weigel refers to as a "habit of being", leads him to his second proposition, namely that "there is nothing sentimental about Catholicism." As Flannery O'Connor wrote, "there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism" (p.12). But are these uncompromising propositions, we might ask, at the core of current Catholic education and therefore second nature to young Catholics around the world today?

Weigel makes the point against the contemporary nihilist claim that nothing is really of consequence that, "Catholicism insists that everything is of consequence, because everything has been redeemed by Christ". He adds: "And if you believe that, it changes the way you see things. It changes the way everything looks" (p.13).

An uncompromising start then to these fourteen letters, but not the sharp edge of the ruler over the knuckles approach to Catholicism many of us will remember meted out by teaching sisters and brothers in the 1950s and 60s. But an appeal to young idealism of the 21st century, and the fiery spirit of young people seeking to change the world, by recognising that Catholicism wants to change the world but by always taking the world as it is not as "some other world or some other humanity of our imagining" (p.14).

The Catholic world is the world that God in the person of his Son redeemed - the world that God had created which, in turn "is a world of freedom in which our decisions have real consequences, for good and for evil" (p.14).

Weigel uses the language of the young to get this powerful message across: "Stuff counts.", he writes. "I count. You count. It all counts. Because all of it - you, me, our friends, our critics, the man I jostled on the subway this morning and the bag lady sleeping on the heating grate at the Farragut North Metro stop, the whole mad, sad, noble, degraded, endlessly fascinating human story - is really His-story, Christ's story, supercharged with that fullness of truth and love that can only come from Truth and Love itself: that can only come from God" (p.17).

**Purpose**

This is what Weigel has learned in his many years as a Catholic, and this is the message he wishes the youth of the world to learn as well. He wants young Catholics to develop, "a habit of being, the habit of seeing things in depth, as they are and for what they are. Everything that is, is for a reason. Everything that happens, happens for a purpose. That's what it means to understand history as His-story. Seeing things in their true dimensions is one very large part of what it means to be a Catholic. For learning to see things aright here is how we become the kind of people who can see, and love, God forever" (p.18).

His tour, designed to sow the seeds of developing this habit of being and thinking, begins in St Peter's in Rome and ends in the Basilica of The Holy Trinity, Kraków. As he takes his tour around many famous, and not so famous sites around the world, he invites his young Catholic readers (and those of us not so young) to seriously think about what this habit of being should be.
From his tour of St Catherine's Monastery in Mount Sinai he gives a striking history lesson, for example, using the submission that the 40-year-old auxiliary Bishop of Kraków - Karol Wojtyla - submitted to Rome following the June 1959 commission establishing the Second Vatican Council.

Archbishop Wojtyla posed a very striking question, namely: "What in the world happened?" How, he asked, "did a 20th century that had begun with such high expectations for the human future produce, within five decades, two world wars, three totalitarian systems, Auschwitz, the Gulag, mountains of corpses, oceans of blood, the greatest persecutions in Christian history, and a cold war that threatened the future of the planet? What happened?" (pp 43-44).

**Rescuing humanism**

What happened, of course, is that Western humanism got it wrong. Archbishop Wojtyla's solution to a world, where in less than 50 years at least 100 million people paid with their lives "for the consequences of some desperately defective ideas of who we are" (p.44), is that "[t]he Church should help rescue humanism - rescue the whole project of modernity - by proposing once again, with full clarity and conviction, that we see the true meaning of our humanity in the face of Christ".

In Christ", he wrote, "we meet the truth that wilfulness is not freedom but a form of slavery" (p.44). As Weigel says, "a Christ-centred humanism is a true and ennobling humanism" (p.45).

So, if you are going to Cologne, take this book with you. If you're not going, read this book anyway, old or young. Take George Weigel's tour on the Catholic "habit of being"; his tour of a "distinctive Catholic worldliness". Take the world seriously, that is, take the world for what it is, "the arena of God's action, the place where we meet the love that satisfies our yearning for a love that satisfies absolutely and without a reservation." And if you do, "Welcome", Weigel says, "to the real world" (p.240).

*Professor David Birch is the Director, Corporate Citizenship Research Unit, Deakin University, Melbourne.*

Reprinted from *AD2000* Vol 18 No 6 (July 2005), p. 17