

Restoring Humanity: Essays on the Evangelization of Culture. By R. Jared Staught. Belmont, NC: Divine Providence Press, 2020. pp. 193

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Is there such a thing as a Christian civilization? If so, what is it? And is building such a civilization the goal of Christian life? These provocative questions undergird Staudt's thoughtful essays in *Restoring Humanity*. In the tradition of other great books that call for the re-Christianization of culture, Staudt makes a strong argument for recovering a sense of mission in bringing the Gospel to bear on the whole of life. He does so by carefully examining how the claims of Christianity lived out in the practice of our faith contribute to building a Christian culture.

What is remarkable about the text is that Staudt appeals to neither nostalgia, nor a bygone golden age, but rather the perennial call of the members of the Church to be pilgrims in a beautiful yet fallen world. "The mission of the Church consists in evangelization, the proclamation of the Good News of salvation.... Salvation implies healing—the forgiveness of sin and repairing of brokenness—as well as renewal—the communication of grace that transforms and elevates." He builds his case for healing and renewal in conscientious dialogue with those who question whether Christian civilization is the goal or simply a byproduct of Christian life. This dialogue produces a thoughtful and critical reflection on what is essential to evangelizing culture. It is a worthy read for the academic or layperson alike.

The book is organized into nine chapters developed from previous lectures and presentations that examine the substance of Christian culture and the particular places where that culture is built. In many ways these essays serve as homage to Christopher Dawson as

well as to Don Briel and Fr. Matthew Lamb, to whom the book is dedicated. Pulling from a variety of theologians, magisterial documents, and numerous historians and philosophers, Staudt provides an impressive bibliography for each chapter. Thereby he supports a deeper appreciation for the task of evangelization and the way in which the Gospel is meant to penetrate and redeem every facet of human experience.

From the land to the family, education and the university, Staudt treats each with erudition and humility. He proposes neither a set plan nor an option, but a critical awareness and deeper appreciation for how our Catholic faith ought to integrate and in many cases restore these cultural institutions. Each chapter is a complete essay on its own. As a collection of essays, the book returns again and again to the main themes.

Particularly noteworthy are the chapters dedicated to the land, the family, and education. "The Land as a Place for Evangelization" examines the narrative of salvation history and the nature of the Church in light of the theology of place, inheritance, and home. The Church itself is both a symbol of holy land, a place where God's presence is given space and made known, and a steward of land that it must carefully till and keep. Staudt weaves together biblical exegesis, Catholic social teaching, and the agrarian insights of Wendell Berry into a compelling case for more seriously considering how being in right relationship with the land advances the healing and renewal of culture.

"The Family as Builder of Christian Culture" provides a summary of the central insights of the call by the last three pontiffs to rediscover the joy and mission of family life. It is the most prescriptive of the chapters. It provides an assessment of our current cultural moment and ways to reengage and re-sanctify family life. Staudt makes the bold claim that "there can be no Christian culture unless a supernatural, grace-filled relationship with God animates the life of the family." He provides four such ways in which a grace-filled relationship with God

can be supported in the family: by a life of prayer, authentic education, meaningful work, and intentional community.

The sixth chapter (“Living the Truth: Forming Culture as the Goal of Education”) not only elevates the task of education but examines what is lost if only a pragmatic paradigm is used. Staudt favors uniting the fundamental search for truth with the contemporary aim of utility. Here his experience in Catholic education paints a sober yet hopeful vision of Catholic schools that embrace the central aims of education as forming (not just acquiescing to) culture.

Is there such a thing as a Christian civilization? And is building such a civilization the goal of Christian life? In short, Staudt’s answer is yes, but neither in an oversimplistic way nor with a triumphalistic tone. Rather, he provides a thoughtful and well supported reminder that Christian culture is both the result and the catalyst of authentic discipleship. If we are to restore humanity, we must seek to restore ourselves and the institutions that contribute to our being. In the end, this book is deep but approachable, and many of its essays will make their way into my course readings this semester.