

THE WESTERN WORLD IS DEEPLY TROUBLED

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Robert Cardinal Sarah, *The Day Is Now Far Spent* (Ignatius Press)

Many observers have commented on the decline of Western civilization, but among Catholic students of this subject, no one captures the essence of what has happened better than Robert Cardinal Sarah. What makes his analysis so potent is that he is not of the West: He is African. Thus, he can see things that many Westerners overlook.

The Catholic Church faces problems in many parts of the world, but it is in the West where the situation is most serious. Radical individualism and radical egalitarianism are destroying our Judeo-Christian heritage, leaving our culture corrupted by narcissism and an unhealthy appetite for equal outcomes (as opposed to equal opportunities). There is also a crisis of faith in the West, and it is one that has affected the internal dynamics of the Church.

Sarah is not dispirited. He is fully aware of the challenges that the Church is faced with but he does not despair. "The mystery of Judas is spreading. Therefore, I want to say to all priests: stay strong and upright. Certainly, because of a few ministers, you will all be labeled homosexuals. They will drag the Church through the mud. They will present her as though she were made up entirely of hypocritical, power-hungry priests. Let not your heart be troubled."

The problems within the Church are daunting, but it is wrong to make sweeping generalizations. "The immoral priests, bishops, and cardinals will in no way tarnish the luminous testimony of more than four hundred thousand priests

throughout the world who, every day and faithfully, serve the Lord in holiness and joy." He is optimistic. "Despite the violence of the attacks that she may suffer," he says, "the Church will not die. This is the Lord's promise, and his word is infallible."

While much of this book shows the imprint of Pope Benedict XVI on Sarah—the African cardinal stresses the deleterious effects of moral relativism—he is at one with Pope Francis in emphasizing the role of the devil. It is not by happenstance that the West, and the Church itself, are suffering.

What was morally right is now morally wrong, and vice versa. "Good and evil no longer exists," he says. "Evil is good, good is evil." Indeed, "we prefer to think that the devil no longer exists. Some bishops even say that he is only a symbolic image. Jesus Christ is supposedly lying, therefore, when he claims that he is quite real, that he was tempted several times by him, the Prince of the world!"

This is tough stuff. Sarah is not afraid to call out the dissenters in the Church, even those who are senior members of the clergy. "Satan has a fierce hatred of priests. He wants to defile them, to make them fall, to pervert them. Why? Because by their whole life they proclaim the truth of the Cross."

The evidence that Sarah is right is all around us. Most priests are good men, but there is a segment among the clergy—including members of the hierarchy—who have let us down. Some of their failures have been severe, and when that happens, the hand of the devil is surely at work.

What does the devil want? "The sign of Satan is division." He wants to "divide the Church. The prince of darkness wants first to sow opposition among us." Satan is particularly adept at targeting priests. "Satan intends to destroy priests and the teaching of doctrine." He not only hates the liturgy and the sacraments, he seeks "to instill lukewarmness and doubt in

priests.”

Sarah offers an extensive discussion of gender ideology, the idea that the sexes are not fixed attributes. The proponents of this ideology would have us believe that the sexes are a cultural creation, having nothing to do with our nature, or with nature’s God. “According to this ideology,” Sarah writes, “only what I construct is worthy of me.” This view is the natural consequence of a society engulfed in narcissism and moral relativism.

It is this vision of humanity that Sarah challenges. “A man could therefore think of himself and construct himself as a woman. This claim can go so far as the alleged freedom to transform one’s body by a surgical operation, thought of as the recreation of a sex chosen and fabricated by oneself.” He does not exaggerate. Indeed, this kind of madness is enshrined in a bill, the Equality Act, that will be taken up by the Congress this fall.

“In the gender ideology,” Sarah observes, “there is a deep rejection of God the Creator.” How could it not be? To be in rebellion against one’s nature is not only abnormal, it is a profound statement of pride, the notion that I am the center of the universe needing no help from God. No wonder the suicide rate is so high among transgender men and women.

Gender ideology has serious implications for the family. “It endangers the institutions of fatherhood and motherhood. In the view of some Western governments,” Sarah notes, “the words ‘father’ and ‘mother’ have become improper. They speak of ‘parent 1’ and ‘parent 2.’ The first victims of these behaviors are obviously the children.”

Sarah is right to say that we have reduced fatherhood and motherhood to “role playing.” This kind of game is an example, he says, of “a visceral hatred of the family,” one that has torn at the very fabric of society. The hatred he speaks of is

on grand display by radical gay activists who are in a constant state of rebellion against traditional moral values. They are supported by many heterosexual activists as well.

Contrary to what Sarah's critics say, he has more respect for the dignity of homosexuals than many gay leaders have. For instance, he objects to labeling people as LGBT and the like. Why? Because such a vision does not see homosexuals as individuals; rather, it portrays them as simply part of a collectivity. "These persons are fundamentally loved by God," he says, "just as every man and woman is."

Similarly, Sarah says "the first victims of LGBT ideology are the persons who experience a homosexual orientation. They are led by militants to reduce their whole identity to their sexual behavior." Regrettably, this is often true.

Imagine someone who is an American, an Italian, a male, a Catholic, a left-hander, a veteran, a Bostonian, a plumber, and a homosexual. One of those status groupings may be his master status, but it would be bizarre to learn that the only identity that matters to him is his sexual orientation. Yet that is what gay militants are fostering—reducing one's identity to what one does in bed and with whom.

Institutions of higher education are actively promoting gender ideology. As Sarah points out, so are many elites in the foundation world. He mentions the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the International Planned Parenthood Federation. Many more could be cited. Billionaire atheist George Soros is actively engaged, as are most of the cream of the crop in the philanthropic community. Count Wall Street among the big supporters as well.

Sarah sees the hand of the devil at work. He says that "the family is an institution that is utterly unbearable to the devil." It is a "place of love," and that is not something Satan will tolerate. "Even more profoundly," Sarah opines,

“the union of father, mother, and child is a trace of the fruitful unity of Divine Trinity. Through families, the devil tries to profane the Trinitarian Unity.”

As we have seen, Sarah is a great champion of priests, but he pulls no punches in assessing the damage that some have done. Not all of it is sexual in nature. Much of it is a function of cowardice.

“The Church is dying because her pastors are afraid to speak in all truth and clarity. We are afraid of the media, afraid of public opinion, afraid of our own brethren! The good shepherd gives his life for his sheep.” It is refreshing to read that he personally seeks “neither success nor popularity.”

What he says rings true. One Friday afternoon back in the late 1990s, New York Archbishop John Cardinal O’Connor summoned me to his office. We never got around to talking about what he wanted to see me about. That’s because I walked into his office rather dismayed, if not angry. I asked him, “What’s wrong with so many priests these days? Why don’t they take a stand?”

“Sit down, Bill,” Cardinal O’Connor said. “Priests want to be liked,” he said. “I want to be liked too, your Eminence, but I want to be respected first.” He nodded in agreement, and we continued the conversation.

Sarah counsels against such cravings. “A priest must not be preoccupied with knowing whether he is appreciated by the faithful. He must simply ask himself whether he proclaims God’s Word, whether the doctrine that he teaches is God’s, whether he fully carries out God’s will.”

The esteemed sociologist, Amitai Etzioni, notes that there are two characteristics that are natural to all human beings: the need for affection and the need for recognition. If a child is deprived of these human wants, he suffers badly. But not only

children: Adults need affection and recognition as well. Yet these needs can become a problem if they act to stunt our moral courage. Being liked should never trump our moral duties.

I have often been asked by those who work in other organizations, and who support our work at the Catholic League, what the secrets of our success are. What kind of advice can I offer? I always say the same thing: I can give you plenty of ideas, all sorts of do's and don'ts, but there is one thing I can never give you—courage. It is not transferable. And if you are to be a leader, I tell them, you had better have the chops to take a licking. The public can be cruel.

“For Jesus,” Sarah maintains, “one thing only counts: the truth (Jn: 18: 37-38). All his life, he served the truth, he gave witness to the truth.” The implications of this sage observation are profound. It means we cannot sell out in the name of being liked. This applies to all of us, not just priests.

Sarah asks us to reflect on the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus. “Pilate is the man of authority. He does not understand who Jesus is, this king who seems to have no human authority. Jesus seeks to make him understand that the power to dominate is nothing compared to the truth. Then Pilate takes refuge in calling it into question. The truth frightens him.”

The truth frightens more than Pilate. But we have a calling—one that emanates from God—to pursue the truth, even when it hurts to do so. Prudence, of course, is not something that should be ignored. But when caring about what others think of us matters more than doing what is right, trouble follows.

Cardinal Sarah gives us much to ponder. He is brilliant, courageous, and totally honest.