

The Heresy of Efficiency

Part 1: The Idolatry of Achievement

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In our on-going considerations of underlying presumptions and preoccupations of contemporary culture and catechesis I want to consider the thought of a wonderful Catholic thinker, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and what he has to say in an essay entitled ‘Efficiency and Holiness’ (*The New Tower of Babel*, 1977) In this essay, he discusses what he calls the ‘heresy of efficiency.’ What he says there has deep relevance for our catechesis. Von Hildebrand goes into three different ways this heresy of efficiency can be understood. We will explore aspects of this heresy in this and in the following issue of *The Sower*.

One way to understand the heresy of efficiency is that it is rooted in an idolatry of man’s achievements. Achieving great things is considered to be man’s greatest value. With this man’s center of gravity has shifted away from what man *is* to what he *does*. This idolatry of achievement not only affects the ways in which we judge one another, but also how we judge ourselves. We replace the authentic ideal of holiness with the mere accomplishment of ‘great things’.

Von Hildebrand invites us to examine our culture in this light. He says, ‘The mentality of an epoch is characterized by those who are the objects of its worship [esteem], those who receive the greatest publicity.’ (p.207) In the medieval era those who received the greatest publicity were the saints. By contrast, during the Renaissance era it was so-called ‘geniuses’ who received the greatest attention. So, for example, the Pantheon in Paris used to be a church dedicated to St. Genevieve, but during the Renaissance it was changed into a monument to great men, men who were famous because of their achievements. The inscription above the entrance sums up the change: ‘Aux grands hommes la patrie reconnaissante.’ The veneration is now for ‘great men’. Voltaire, who frequently made use of his works to criticize Catholic dogma, is buried there. So is Rousseau, whose work on education, *Émile*, was condemned by the Archbishop of Paris because of its rejection of original sin.

The Effects on Catechesis

It is probably clear how this heresy of efficiency in the form of idolatry affects catechesis?. We can simply ask ourselves: who do many ‘worship’ in contemporary culture? Who receives the greatest publicity? Who do we place in ‘the Pantheon’? Ours is a celebrity culture. Typically, our culture holds up for our admiration sports figures, actors, and media figures. And are these really those who *should* receive the most attention? Do we really believe that these represent what is highest in humanity? Not only are the values being admired out of proportion; an additional problem in this celebrity culture is the confusion that arises over fundamental values because some of those we esteem in these fields of the media and sport adopt lifestyles we must regard as morally corrupt, and these lifestyles can be glossed over in favor of their achievements.

Dealing with this in catechesis is not easy. Many catechists will recognize the situation when sports and media-related interests begin to be centre-stage in the lives of their students. Children begin to give more and more of their time to sports, or to an acting class, and then start to miss out on their parish religious education classes.

Catechetical Responses

How do we respond to this? First, we can build bridges where we can. We can make clear that sports, acting and other areas of human achievement are in and of themselves good. And we can look for the most promising Christian models in these areas. Sports can even be used as an analogy for the spiritual life. St. Paul does as much: ‘Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control, in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable’ (1 Cor. 9:24-26).

Links between sports and virtues such as self-control and courage can be developed. Many of our students are willing to sacrifice time, effort, energy and money to become better at sports. They are willing to get up early and run ten miles - but cannot get up to go to Mass! They can lift weights and push themselves to exhaustion – so what about embracing the rigors of fasting and prayer?

Second, we might help our students to realize the limited value of what they might be setting their hearts upon. We can help them to realize that many of the people we idolize are not always happy with fame and success. Some do not like the things that come with fame, such as the attention they receive. Even the money can cause problems. Quite often they never know who is truly a friend or not.

The deepest and most lasting response is the way proposed by von Hildebrand. He reminds us that while man is capable of realizing many values, the greatest of all are moral and spiritual values. This is where man’s primary vocation lies. Maybe one does not achieve great things in the eyes of the world – but true greatness lies elsewhere. Man’s real vocation is holiness. Man is meant to embody the supernatural virtues. All other created goods and achievements are secondary compared to this. No excellence in any field can be compared with the values embodied by a saint. It is upon the saints that we must focus our students’ attention. Man’s ultimate greatness is summed up in the words of St. Paul, ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.’ (Gal. 2:20) In eternity man will not be judged by his efficiency, or by earthly achievements, but by the way in which he conformed his will to that of God – often in hidden ways. ‘For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?’ (Matt 16:26)

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