

HEART OF THE HALL

A STUDENT PUBLICATION FROM
THE OFFICE OF MISSION & MINISTRY

BLOGS.SHU.EDU/HEARTOFTHEHALL

VOLUME VI ISSUE I

WINTER 2024

GREETINGS FROM THE EDITOR

COMPILED BY ERICH SANDERS

As the last leaves fall on campus and the winter season begins, we hold in our minds the memories, both joyful and sorrowful, we have made over the past semester. Here at the Heart of the Hall we have been blessed with a new group of authors and contributors, all of whom are helping to bring this publication to life. The future holds great promise: new perspectives and new ideas will bring to the fore new dimensions of our campus and student's spiritual lives.

In this issue, however, we do not only look towards the future but also pay our respect to the past. Last year one of our prior authors, Andrew Echevarria, tragically passed away. While at Seton Hall he left a great mark on both the Heart of the Hall and the wider campus community, and we would like to dedicate this issue of our publication to him. The theme of the present issue – the importance of leisure – takes its inspiration from his 2021 article “Why YOU Need Leisure Right Now,” which will be republished as the first article of the issue. Please remember him and his family in your prayers. Andrew's article focuses on the importance of leisure in general, offering a refreshing take on leisure drawing from Joseph Pieper's thought. He provides concrete paths towards incorporating leisure in our daily lives as students and professionals, while encouraging each of us to pursue leisure not for the sole purpose of relaxation, but rather for the betterment of ourselves.

Jimmy Gifford's article explores the spiritual and ethical themes of Dostoyevsky's masterwork *Crime and Punishment*, focusing on how the sense of meaninglessness can lead to disastrous consequences. By wrestling with the challenges presented by the work, Jimmy reminds us that through great art and its appreciation a true sense of leisure is cultivated which encourages growth of both heart and mind. As this first piece is part of a couplet, be sure to come back to the next issue for Jimmy's full thoughts on the novel!

Susanna Testa offers an account of the importance of seeing God in those places in which we experience leisure. In taking us through how the beach reminds her of God's presence, Susanna prompts us to think about where and how God is present in those places we find leisure – even if we might not expect it. To see God's glory and love for us in creation through provides a simpler way to love the Lord and grow both in our spiritual lives and our appreciation of God's gifts.

Kennedy Dierks takes us with her on her study-abroad trip to Italy and along the way teaches us the importance of being in a place rather than doing in a place. Sometimes doing what appears to be nothing is better than doing something which just fills up time, and it is precisely the simple enjoyment of being that fosters a true sense of leisure.

Lastly, in my own piece I reflect on the importance of food in the practice of leisure. Slowing down and appreciating the community which arises from food and cooking helps each of us to see the presence of God in the simplest, and often most forgotten, parts of our day to day lives. The Heart of the Hall hopes that the meditations on leisure contained within this issue help you foster your appreciation and practice of leisure, especially as the semester ends and Christmas approaches. By quieting our minds through true forms of leisure, let us draw closer to Christ as He comes into the world and our hearts.



Erich Sanders, Editor-in-Chief

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IN PURSUIT OF LEISURE

ANDREW ECHEVERIA

PUBLISHED MARCH 28, 2021

I found myself lost in the woods towards the end of 2020, metaphorically speaking. I took time and investigated what my year consisted of in the midst of the chaos which had unfolded. I lacked a number of disciplines in my life which led me to fall spiritually astray. The need for order, routine, and tradition overcame me as I desired to get back on the right path. For this reason, I decided to embark on Exodus 90: a rigorous spiritual transformative expedition for Catholic men. I will spare the details, but some things sacrificed during those days are media (such as YouTube, and Netflix), snacks, alcohol, video games, and more, while intense prayer, rigorous exercise, and such are incorporated into our daily schedule. Since I could not do many

of the activities that I normally enjoy during those 90 days, I realized that I needed to make proper use of my free time. I started to contemplate and write down a plan for incorporating good leisure time for the sake of my growth – both intellectual and spiritual.

Before I could come up with new habits of leisure, I wanted to identify the ones that were causing restlessness within me. Out of the many distractions I had in 2020, my worst was media: I spent countless wasteful hours on YouTube and scrolling through Twitter and other forms of social media. There is nothing wrong with the use of

“Only the silent hear, and those who do not remain silent do not hear.”

James Pieper

Instagram, Twitter, et cetera, but the overuse of such can be wasteful. I realized that looking at content that neither made me grow nor be of use to me, led to a decline in my spiritual life and productivity. Instagram, for example, is purposefully designed to keep you scrolling on the app, which I would do many hours each week. I sought to change this habit; although it was not an easy start, I realized that in order to grow, I needed to do something uncomfortable. How could I grow as a person if I simply stayed in my own comfort zone? For example, if I wanted to lose a significant amount of weight and get out of my habits of sitting on the couch all day, I would have to do the uncomfortable and stop being lazy, get up, and start moving in order to achieve those goals. In my specific situation, if I wanted to stop consuming wasteful hours on media, I needed to set boundaries (which can be uncomfortable) and refrain from my old habits. Upon sacrificing this, I found myself with a lot of free time initially. Many college students find themselves in a similar situation; after conversing with others, I noticed that they were just as wasteful and unproductive in their free time. I realized that an excessive amount of free time often leads to depression, loneliness, and isolation. I found myself in that category too, but thankfully a few of my thoughts – gathered with the help of some of my classes, literature and experience – helped me overcome those sentiments.

To go about substituting good leisure for my social media addiction, I had to actually contemplate what exactly good

leisure presupposes. One of the more important titles written on that topic in the twentieth century was Joseph Pieper's *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. He defines leisure as “the disposition of receptive understanding, of contemplative beholding, and immersion in the real.” Essentially, Pieper argues that leisure is a certain understanding of the mind and a condition of the soul that stimulates a capacity to perceive the reality of the world. Using Pieper's work and arguments, I will suggest how good leisure appears on the surface, but also the internal impact it can have.

Pieper writes, “leisure is a form of silence; of that silence which is a prerequisite of the apprehension of reality. Only the silent hear, and those who do not remain silent do not hear.” He begins by arguing that the first step towards leisure is silence in order to hear, not in a literal sense, but rather in a manner to perceive the world with our eyes and minds. This does not necessarily mean to cancel all kind of noise and to live life like a Carthusian Monk in pure silence. Rather, it suggests that this silence is for the soul's power to answer to the reality of the world if left tranquil. Leisure, in Pieper's work, “is not a Sunday afternoon idle, but the preserve of freedom of education and of culture of that undiminished humanity which views the world as a whole.” This idea suggests a pulling away from the distractions of

the real world. Leisure is thus not primarily found in a work setting or while doing a chore, but instead, a way to work on oneself for the sake of others during free time and to orient ourselves to be strengthened for God and for neighbor. This is almost countercultural since leisure is usually thought of as only for the sake of one's own pleasure. Pieper argues that the whole purpose of leisure is to grow in virtue – interiorly and exteriorly – as an act of worship of God and a purification of the self.

Leisure, when understood with Pieper's definition, is the primary means to properly tackle Exodus 90 apart from one's daily duties. The reason that some of my housemates and I decided to undertake Exodus 90 was driven by a shared desire to grow as men: men who take risks out in the world and are not weak when it comes to facing trials and temptations. We aspire to be men who lay down their lives for their neighbors and men who die to themselves and pick up their cross to follow Christ every day. We strive to be men who desire to be "perfect as [our] heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). This would not be accomplished if I spent my leisure time slacking, for example, playing video games when I promised not to. In my mind, I wanted to use leisure as a mechanism to build the ark that protects the world from the flood. The world is dangerous and polluted, often filled with hatred, anger, distractions and opposition; but in St. Paul's words, my intention for all is to "set [our] minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on earth" (Col. 3:2).

I created a list of different leisure activities that would assist me to both relax and grow in worship of God and for neighbor. This list differs from the conventional "go out and exercise" or "journal every day" that people typically plan to do regardless. I settled on five directives for leisure that have greatly impacted me over the last few months:

- **Read** – Reading is what I do for most of my day. It's a dominant part of what I do for my majors. For 2021, my goal is to read an average of one book a week (which is going rather successfully thus far). The disciplines that come with Exodus 90 are only going to make this all the more possible. But besides reading for class, I personally like to read literature that 1) helps me escape from reality, 2) increases my intellectual knowledge, 3) are academic-based reads on various subjects, and 4) helps me grow spiritually. My top recommendations for reads that become a portal for an exterior world are J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the short stories of Flannery O'Connor, *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, and more. Some of the best work for self-improvement and growth are *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg, *12 Rules for Life* by Jordan Peterson,

and *Talking to Strangers* by Malcolm Gladwell. For fun and intellectual growth, I genuinely enjoy reading the *Summa Theologiae* by Thomas Aquinas, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie, and *The Sky of Our Manufacture* by Jesse Oak Taylor. The spiritual reads that have renewed my spiritual life include works by C.S. Lewis – specifically *Mere Christianity* and *The Screwtape Letters* – along with the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, and *Saint John Paul the Great: His Five Loves* by Jason Evert. The list goes on longer than I could write – granted, these are my personal favorites for the moment.

- **Learn a New Activity or Further Develop One** – This could range from learning or further developing guitar skills, chess strategies, drawing, writing, memorizing scripture verses and more. This is personal preference, but in general, something that relaxes the mind away from work but also is productive.
- **Spend Intentional Time with People** – We are made for love, communion, and for each other. The only way we can flourish in our human natures is to properly celebrate Feats in community.
- **Sleep** – Having sufficient amount of sleep per night sets one up for success the next day. Many complications disappear because of such. I encourage you to go to bed and wake up at the same time daily.
- **Pray** – There are many forms of prayer, and the Church offers a beautiful and Holy spiritual buffet. Adore the marvels of the Lord in your life and outside.

One of the strongest ways to grow in the basis of our culture is by indulging ourselves with proper leisure. True leisure is not about taking a few breaks throughout the day to play video games or binge watch shows on Netflix. Rather, the way we can break open this world of distractions is if we genuinely go deep and consider the profound things of the world and the marvels of God. I am not saying we should all do Exodus 90 (or Fiat 90 for women), but we all should decide what to do with the precious time given to us. My encouragement is to use leisure wisely so that we can stay on the right path of life.



THE SUFFERING HEART

BY JIMMY GIFFORD

Where to orient oneself can be a difficult thing to know, but persistent ambiguity and suffering can overwhelm the mind and depress the soul into a confused mania. Without a proper direction, meaninglessness takes the reigns, resentment then nests in the absence of purpose, thus leading one to do anything. Having recently read Fyodor Dostoevsky's brilliant novel *Crime and Punishment*, I'm struck by how he examines the ways this phenomenon can affect a person, and most importantly, how one can be redeemed from it. Firstly, I will concentrate on how Dostoevsky portrays the ways one can cause deep suffering to one's own heart. Then, a follow-up article will consider the surprising ways the novelist shows how even the most hopeless heart can find redemption.

Dostoevsky's protagonist Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov suffers in extreme poverty within a small apartment in St. Petersburg. A plan to murder and rob a local elderly pawn broker to seize her wealth haunts his mind. She is a raggedy, conniving old woman who takes advantage of poverty-stricken residents, whom Raskolnikov considers her a parasite. [DJM2] His rationalism has convinced him there is no immorality in his plan, and, yet he finds himself revolting and panicking over the potential murder. His nihilism conflicts with his inherent moral code, his calculation fights with his chaotic subconscious, and so he is left sheepish when he meets the pawnbroker. Discombobulated and experiencing madness, resentment, nervousness, and cowardice, Raskolnikov strikes and kills her. Then he does the same to the innocent Lizaveta, who walks into the apartment and is shocked by her sister's murder. Appalled by his evil actions, he hardly steals any wealth then barely escapes. This is all by way of suggestion. What is needed here, though, in whatever way you wish to word it, is a sentence that focuses on what this piece addresses and then a "coming attractions" mention for the article that will appear in the next issue.

So Raskolnikov committed his crime. Now for his punishment. His true punishment is not his incarceration, which does not happen until the end of the novel. Instead, it is the damage that is done to his soul by his internal decision to commit murder, damage that makes itself apparent through his tormented internal dialogue throughout the entire book. Dostoevsky's examination of the impoverished human soul, in a struggle between nihilism and faith and rationalism and spirit, fully unravels following the murder. Raskolnikov the person unravels as well because he closed his heart to God and opened it to evil

Dostoevsky's attack on utilitarian morality is exemplified by the murder's disastrous effects on the murderer. Raskolnikov

convinced himself that there was no moral crime in killing the old woman because she had no redeeming qualities, and even framed his logic in a way that presented himself as a heroic figure defeating an oppressor of the poor. His insistence on a coldly rationalist, de-humanized approach to moral decision-making is disrupted by his chaotic mental state and plague of thoughts, which his being intuitively signals are wrong. The abstract fantasy of the murder is dethroned by material reality when Raskolnikov goes through with it .

“Raskolnikov the person unravels as well because he closed his heart to God and opened it to evil.”

His interior conflict is illustrated by his attempt at atonement when he gives the money that he stole to support the family of a dying drunk, particularly his daughter Sonya. Ironically, when Raskolnikov puts his effort forward in doing a kind deed for needy people, he, the truly desperate one, meets the girl who will be his love and the instrument of his spiritual rebirth. Raskolnikov's contradictory actions are the physical representation of the conflict between his heart and his mind. He knows that there is moral law, it is written in his heart, but his mind desperately wants to reject it for a sense of his own self-interest. When Raskolnikov must rationalize the circumstances in his life, the suffering demoralizes him and encourages him to bend morality as necessary to pursue his idea of material well-being. However, when he is placed in a situation that is not immediately relevant to him, he conveys a tendency to be virtuous and sociable. This struggle over Raskolnikov's soul is internal but also external, as Raskolnikov's moral foundation fights with his nihilism and inability to govern his own faculties of reason.

When pressed in the police station, Raskolnikov's philosophy is revealed. He argued that humanity was fundamentally split into two classes, one higher class consisting of "great men" who are capable of innovation and driving the world forward, and another of lower people who can only follow along. Given this distinction, a "Napoleon" is justified in violating the moral code and committing crimes if those structures are in the way of the "great man's" pursuits.

Raskolnikov's attempted rational interpretation of the world crystallizes in this moment when he defends his argument in front of the men at the bureau after only being implied beforehand. While it is a perfect explanation for committing the murders it is ironic for multiple reasons. First is that Napoleon was considered a great figure in mid-nineteenth century Russia at all, following the widespread Russian death and devastation because of the French invasion under Bonaparte, highlighting the intellectual reach and impact of Enlightenment and modernist thinking, even in an opposing society. Second is Raskolnikov's self-awareness: he considers himself a "Napoleon", but he is a deeply nihilistic, unhealthy, and antisocial man who lives in abject poverty. Thus, his only idea of self-worth is his self-diagnosed intellect, a trait which other people apparently do not share. Again, this is evidence of Raskolnikov's rejection of the world's value and refusal to be grateful for things he has, like his loving family and friendship with Razumikhin.

Instead, his heart is resentful and antagonistic, seeking to punish the world for being unfair to "great men" like him. Dostoevsky sharply attacks the inflated egos of materialist and rationalist intellectuals with this depiction of Raskolnikov and subtle depiction of submission to French ways. He mockingly paints their theories as silly. This display of an apparently lofty and seductive ideology is undermined because the one espousing it is the embodiment of its emptiness.

At Sonya's apartment, Raskolnikov intensely questions her suffering. Sonya gets increasingly paranoid but remains faithful to God. She experiences more hardship and suffering than Raskolnikov ever did and has far less hope for a successful career but continues to step forward in life because she believes it is worth it. Even in her sinful profession, which she did not choose willingly, she maintains her belief in Christianity. This foils Raskolnikov's approach to life: nihilistic, selfish, and murderous, despite experiencing less-trying circumstances than Sonya. In contrast, it reveals that Raskolnikov's decision-making and his brand of utilitarian thought is an unfounded, morally repugnant excuse for sin. It tears his heart away from faith and towards resentment, away from love and towards murder. He is enchanted with Sonya because she disproves his view of the world with her faith, and her example is the primary catalyst of his redemption.

Sonya's voice slowly and steadily gains confidence as she illustrates the revival of Lazarus after lying in his tomb for four days. The scene itself is ironic, two destitute young people, one a prostitute and the other a double murderer, attentively reading scripture together. However, Dostoevsky crafted their interaction this way on purpose because it conveys the

importance of values and the power of Christianity in life; it reaches the lowest of the low and illuminates their hearts. Jesus reviving Lazarus serves as an allegory for Raskolnikov's redemption. When he killed the women, he killed his own soul and closed his heart to Christ. Four days later, listening to the Gospel, he begins to reopen his heart to the Lord and initiate his own repentance and spiritual revival.



The murderer says that he means to ask for forgiveness and admits his deeds, a major milestone for the self-declared "Napoleon" and nihilist. He expresses belief he has done wrong and has faith in some sort of moral law greater than himself. Raskolnikov's redemption is not an instant reset to purity, but a process of turning one's attention away from temptation and towards a better life. Sonya is the beacon that inspires his repentance and to leave his old ways behind. Now, however, he must combat temptation instead of being its victim to acquire phronema, that is, a practice of authentic and complete trust in religious and moral ethics drawn from Dostoevsky's Orthodox Christianity. Raskolnikov's next step is to receive his grace, so that he may be redeemed and practice faith in the proper manner, healing his spiritual sickness. Dostoevsky illustrates with Raskolnikov's example that a Christian redemption is not a scathing punishment, as the title may suggest; it is a bath, washing away unclean thoughts and deeds and reorienting consciousness towards a better life, in vibrant union with God. The following article will explore how Raskolnikov receives his grace and is morally redeemed, so that he may live a better and more holy life.

AS DEEP AS THE OCEAN: FINDING GOD IN HIS CREATION

BY SUSANNA TESTA

When I think of leisure, the first thing that comes to mind is the beach. There is nothing I love more in the summer than to plop my beach chair on the sand, lather myself with my SPF, and relax. I have grown up by the Jersey shore all my life. As I have gotten older, the beach has remained a place of comfort and peace. When I was younger, the beach was a place for me to play mermaids and build sandcastles. In my teenage years, it was my place to tan and take pictures. Now as I am approaching my twenties, the beach has turned into something a bit more meaningful to me – it is an oasis of God’s presence.

Spending lots of time at the beach this summer has given me much time to reflect, since there is not much else to do at the beach. As I continue to deepen my relationship with God, it has become so easy to recognize Him through all His creation while lounging on my beach chair. I often bring a prayer journal to document my thoughts. What I have learned from doing so is that God is always speaking to us: we just have to listen.

When I think about something, I usually try to think about it from all angles—and there are so many ways to look at the beach. For me, the most prominent part is the waves. No matter the time of day or the weather outside, it is guaranteed that the waves will rhythmically crash on the shore. When I stand along the shore, I feel the waves roll against my ankles, which makes me think about how God is always trying to draw close to us. We can either step towards the wave or back away from it. All throughout the Bible, God assures us of his unfailing love. There is a song by Cory Asbury called “Reckless Love” where he describes the “reckless” love God has for us. The chorus of the song references the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15, where the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep to go after the one that strayed away. Whenever I listen to this song, it reminds me how the love God has for us is a love so profound and so personal to each of us.

I often associate the ocean with God’s love. When I am at the beach staring at the ocean ahead, all I see are miles of shoreline in both directions when I turn my head. I feel this way whenever I am aboard a cruise ship at sea – the ocean is all you see in every direction you look. It is so vast and so large; I struggle to comprehend its enormity. I have difficulty understanding how God has such an infinite love for each of us despite our wrongdoings and sins. He loves us even when we hurt Him, even when we don’t choose Him despite Him always choosing us. When I see the ocean, I am reminded of this impossibility of fully

understanding it. Though perhaps we are not supposed to understand it. Perhaps this is why we cannot see the earth’s curvature from our point of view at the beach or on top of the ship. We know that the earth is curved, yet we cannot see it from our perspective. We know God is there, yet sometimes we can’t see Him working in our lives. We know God loves us, yet sometimes we feel unworthy of His great love. We know God has a great plan for us, yet it may not make sense to us now. Believing in all His promises is an act of trust that we must be willing to do even when we cannot see or feel Him close. Looking at the ocean reminds me of the trust we must have to grow in a relationship with the Creator.

The other significant part of a beach is the sand. I love burying my feet in the sand as I watch the waves or picking it up and letting it fall between my fingers. Sometimes I stare at the sand sitting in my hand and I think about how the God who created the entire world is the same God that created me. God is all-knowing—he knows how many grains of sand are on my hand. He also knows how many grains of sand are on the beach. This same God wants to know me and love me, desiring a deep and personal relationship with me. When I think about this, I can’t help but feel His overwhelming love.

The conditions at the beach are not always the same – the tides change, the weather shifts, and even the shape of the shoreline can change. It is this shifting in the tides which reminds me of my relationship with God. Everyone goes through seasons in their walk with God. Sometimes you feel “on fire” for God yet other times your relationship might feel stagnant. When I feel “on fire” for God, I am swimming during high tide. The waves are rough and tall, knocking me down easily. It is easy to pray, and you really feel that God is all around you. Other times, I am swimming during low tide. The waves are quite tiny, and I don’t budge an inch when they crash on top of me. With the waves barely moving me, it’s hard to feel like God is there or even listening. Sometimes I get frustrated when I am swimming during low tide. I feel like the waves should be more powerful and that I should be deeper in the water. But that is not the case. Both high and low tide are part of the ocean. When I find it hard to pray to God during a period of spiritual dryness, I just remind myself that it will pass, and it won’t be like that for too long. The high tide will come.

SUSANNA TESTA
AS DEEP AS THE OCEAN

God speaks to people in different ways. Some may hear God's voice clearly in nature whereas others my experience him more abundantly in the face of a friend. I feel God's presence the most in nature, especially at the beach. My family are avid cruisers, and since they love the beach so much, I have seen many different beaches in the course of my life. From the crystal-clear waters of the Bahamas to the fine pink sand beaches of Bermuda, and to the Belmar beach five minutes from my house, all of these remind me of the different ways God presents Himself to me. Sometimes He is like the "crystal clear" waters of the Bahamas where His voice is so distinct, and I know exactly what He is saying. Other times, His voice is more difficult to hear like the beaches at the Jersey Shore,

where the water is more murky and not as clear. Despite this difficulty, I know that He is always there.

Reflecting in your favorite places can offer much more than pure enjoyment. It can be a place that we encounter God's presence and come to know who He is. Whatever you consider your prime leisure activity or place, God always finds a way to speak to you through it. The beach will always be my ideal place of leisure. As I have reflected, I have seen what a gift nature is. Although the beauty we find in nature and the world around is not the greatest gift from God, it shows us an even greater one: our ability to enjoy it, as our enjoyment of His gifts attests to the love He has for us!



photo by the author

WHEN IN ROME

BY KENNEDY DIERKS

Growing up, my mom's motto for our family was "we take trips, not vacations." I'm so grateful for the opportunities I had growing up to hike around Oregon, zipline in Lake Tahoe, and sightsee in San Francisco. Each trip was characterized by a packed itinerary including museums, attractions, nature activities, or new eateries which helped us make the most of our visit. I'm especially grateful that this active mentality transferred over to my study abroad program at Seton Hall, Italy in the Footsteps of the Saints, where we visited 10 Italian cities in 12 days.

We traveled by bus almost daily, each trip usually lasting between one-and-a-half and three hours – our only opportunity to rest for the day. Even if we were stationed in a city, our time in that region often included a day excursion outside the town (for example, while in Siena we spent a day in the Tuscan countryside) to take fullest advantage of our time abroad. We were almost always awake, packed, and on the bus at 8am to ensure we arrived onsite for a tour before lunch. After lunch, we typically visited another site or two or three) before we headed back for dinner. Our tours were usually on foot to multiple places of interest around the city, which meant we routinely clocked twenty-thousand steps a day.

Our first two days in Italy were spent in Naples, which included an afternoon trip to Pompeii to see the ancient ruins. Next, before venturing north to Mozzagrogna, we went to Lanciano, where we toured the city and visited the site of a Eucharistic Miracle in which bread and wine turned into human cardiac tissue and coagulated blood. We drove an hour to Monte Sant'Angelo the next morning, where we visited the Shrine of St. Michael, before continuing on to San Giovanni Rotondo to visit the new and old church that houses the remains of St. (Padre) Pio of Pietralcina, before attending Italian public Mass and then driving the hour back to Mozzagrogna. After only five days, I was bursting with new knowledge and appreciation of our Catholic faith – and exhaustion.

On the sixth day, at a bright and early 7:30am, we boarded the bus for a three-hour drive to Assisi. I remember wondering what could possibly be in Assisi – besides Saint Francis – that was worth two whole days there, especially when we had so many other places to visit. And, why would we have two whole afternoons of dedicated free time? Isn't that a waste of a trip?

As soon as we saw the city, though – and climbed more than 100 stairs with luggage in hand to enter its walls – it hit me. I was barely within town limits and already infatuated by the

architecture, the views, and the people. Assisi was magical. Time seemed to slow, if not stop, in the Italian countryside. Something about the Gothic and Romanesque architecture made the city seem like a fantasy. Even though it was freezing (a windy 45 degrees Fahrenheit, which is a lot for a girl from sunny Southern California during a warm New Jersey winter), I was eager to walk through the city, climb the many stairs and steep hills, and try as much gelato as possible.

The next day, we ventured back outside the city walls to visit the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels, as well as the Church of San Damiano. I truly felt the presence of the Lord in both spaces, and I could so clearly imagine Francis there, eight centuries ago, being greeted by a miraculous, talking crucifix.

After five fully-packed days, I wanted some free time more than anything – but what does one do in Assisi after seeing all the major sites, and walking all the major hills? We'd tried the three cafes in town and determined the best cappuccino and the best cannoli. We'd gotten multiple flavors of gelato, and taking a nap simply seemed like a waste of time. After all, we were on a trip studying abroad – not vacationing!



I'm by no means someone who enjoys leisure or time off. It takes me two hands to count out all my jobs and internships because, frankly, I'm a workaholic. I'm always doing something, whether it's working as a sacristan at Seton Hall, writing for an online food publication, or shadowing surgeons at the hospital. Even working out – which Andrew Echeverria mentioned as one of his favorite leisurely activities in his 2021 article "Why YOU Need Leisure Right Now" – is a job, since I teach spin class at SHU's Recreation Center. I don't like silence, but not as much as I don't like feeling unproductive.

KENNEDY DIERKS WHEN IN ROME

In Assisi, I was itching for something to do – but I felt like we’d done it all. In a way, resigning myself to doing nothing felt like defeat. Until I remembered that you can’t “win” at vacationing. But I truly felt like I won the lottery in Assisi, doing nothing, just being. I enjoyed my newfound 21-year-old privilege with an Aperol Spritz, nursing my beverage alongside my friends as we shared a charcuterie board. When we finally checked our watches, almost two hours had passed – rather than chastising myself for wasting time, I closed my eyes and smiled. I was in Italy, so why not soak it in? Enjoy a spritz, an espresso, and a gelato, and sit and talk and laugh and process the last few days. Because, after all, I was in Italy – which, all my life, had only been a dream.

After lunch, I wandered through the streets, stopping in the Basilica of Saint Francis. I’ve always loved art, and it was an amazing experience to admire the murals adorning the walls of the sanctuary. Instead of rushing, I got to appreciate the details and the stories the paintings told and imagined Giotto painting them. I got to appreciate, rather than simply observe. And I got to spend a few extra moments with God. Later, at dinner, I gorged



myself on pasta with cream sauce and sausage, and panna cotta for dessert. Afterward, we sat around the table, recounting the days’ events and nursing a glass of house wine until we had just enough room for a late-night gelato. Because, you know, when in Rome (or in this case, Assisi)...

In Assisi, I got to experience Italy rather than rush through it. I got not only a taste of a typical weekday meal, but of an afternoon. I spent some of the Euros I had converted at the start of the trip on something I wanted – a nice leather bag – rather than out of necessity, because I could, and because... why not? That question isn’t asked to suggest St. Francis leads us to consumerism, but instead to consider the difference between taking from life and entering into life.

So often, I ask myself: “why?” Why take a nap when I could be studying for my next exam? Why spend money on a concert when I could be earning money at work? This thinking even interferes with my faith, sometimes, and I ask why I am sitting in silence, letting my mind wander, when I could be, “should be,” actively praying? (And yes, I know that meditation is praying, but sometimes it just feels unproductive.)

Assisi, though, taught me to ask “why not?” Why not stop and sit and admire the view of the countryside, with the small towns and rolling hills and olive trees, rather than glance at it in my periphery as I walk by? Why not taste olive oil and balsamic and cheese, even though we just had lunch? Why not sit in silence and soak in the history of the Basilica of St. Francis, rather than half-heartedly rattling off a rosary so that I can check a box and feel like I did something?

When I returned to New Jersey, so many people asked me what my favorite part of the trip was, and I always answered “Assisi” without hesitation. In Assisi, I felt like I truly experienced Italy, rather than simply going through the motions. I learned by doing, rather than by hearing. I felt the saints – specifically Francis and Chiara – and imagined how they spent their days in Assisi eight hundred years ago, rather than simply learning about their lives there.

Without a day of leisure in Assisi, I don’t know if I would have appreciated the rest of the trip as much as I did. When we had an hour in Siena before dinner, I sat and people-watched in the square rather than rushing around to see more. The next day, when we ended up having two free hours, I sat in Basilica San Domenico with Saint Catherine’s relics, and just thought – about her, about the church, about its art, about its visitors. And, when we finally made it to Rome, we didn’t rush into Vatican City, itching to see St. Peter’s; instead, we went to a café next door to our hotel, and sipped espresso in silence while enjoying each other’s company.

I realized in Assisi that my time in Italy was precious, so when presented with an opportunity for leisure now, I simply ask myself, “why not?”

EATING TO LIVE: FOOD, LEISURE, AND A LIFE WELL-LIVED

BY ERICH SANDERS

*“There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and provide themselves with good things from their toil. For who can eat and drink apart from God?”
Ecclesiastes 2:24-25.*

When you think about food, what do you think about? Is it what you plan to eat, where you plan to eat it, or how much it might cost? All important questions. But how often do we ask ourselves if, aside from nutrition and flavor, there is a deeper meaning and value to the food we eat? Surrounded by the speed of daily life, such a question may fall to the back of our minds when we try to slip in a meal between our school, work, and life responsibilities. In this storm of hustle and bustle nutrition and health may even begin to take a back seat compared to ease in cooking and eating. This path may break us from the most basic components of food consumption, but along the way it also removes those fundamentally deeper aspects of family and community which make us human. After all, eating is an essential bodily function just like breathing, but it is the only bodily function which mankind has joyfully made into an art, a profession, and a passion.

I am privileged to have grown up in a family that loves food. My father has a passion for cooking which introduced me to a wide variety of tastes as I grew up and helped nourish my own love of good food and cooking. But even more importantly, the cooking my father did (and still does) for the family nurtured not only our bodies but also our family life. With each meal came time with the family which formed little oases of leisure and time to connect – we discussed the day, laughed about the good parts, commiserated about the bad parts, heard each other’s stories, and grew closer all while enjoying the lovingly made food which facilitated the whole conversation. Food was and is the heartbeat of our time together; it makes a bond that builds from cutting board to table, bringing out the richness of our shared life in an organic way.

Thus, good cooking and a delicious meal feed both body and soul. Yet often we are not able to share food in this connecting way with our family and friends. The responsibilities of daily life, whatever our particular state may be, can push these elements of food to the background while efficiency and convenience take center stage. With these stresses, God’s gift of food can be diminished from a key means of leisure and genuine community into another of life’s bare necessities, becoming bland and processed. We no longer look towards God to thank Him for His

gifts which have become the object of human art and love when we eat, but instead eat quickly and joylessly, focused on whatever task or deadline is fast approaching in between our bites. The crux of the matter is that our meals go from feeding both body and soul to feeding only our bodies; it is really less about the kind of food eaten than the way that food is *treated* and *understood*.



How can we regain a full appreciation of food as an occasion of leisure and a gift? Turning to God’s word for an answer, the book of Ecclesiastes paradoxically provides a good starting point. While its speaker Qoheleth famously declares that “all things are vanity” again and again, even he encourages the enjoyment of food and drink as a God-given way for man to experience a part of the eternal life of God. Man must make use of the gifts God has given him in a way which point back to their source, and eating and drinking together forms a community which, though it fades, is a glimpse into the eternal communion which God desires with us. The genuine joy and community which come from food point both to man’s mortality and God’s eternity, as what fleeting enjoyments we have in this life are ultimately rooted in God. Qoheleth urges us to enjoy the fruits of our toil so that we may see that we must place our end in God, for “...whatever God does will endure forever; there is no adding to it or taking from it” (Ecc. 3:14).

With this understanding of food as a gift of God which points to man's mortality and God's eternity, the beauty of Christ's use of food in the Gospels, particularly St. John's Gospel, becomes apparent. The significance of Christ's use of food to communicate the message of salvation should not be overlooked, and the sixth chapter of St. John's Gospel offers some clues to a properly Christian understanding of food. When Christ multiplies the loaves and fishes for the crowd, in the end filling "...twelve wicker baskets with fragments", he then explains to the disciples that, while the food the crowds ate may have nourished their bodies, they should "...not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give..." (John 6:13, 26). Food is thus elevated above mere functionality; it signifies something beyond man's temporary sustenance, and instead is raised to a spiritual level in the Eucharist, for Christ is "...the living bread that comes down from heaven", whose bread is His flesh which He gives for the world's life (John 6:51).

The Eucharist is a mystery in its simplicity. We consume Christ Himself each time we receive, are given infinite amount of grace, and enter into deeper unity with God – all under the species of bread and wine, the most basic of foods. For all the creativity of man's mind and his culinary

arts, for all the complex and wonderful flavors he can create, he cannot hope to produce anything which is worth a fraction of that simplicity. But perhaps it is the fact that we depend upon God for our nourishment – both physical and spiritual – that brings about a richer appreciation of the beauty of cooking and sharing

*“Only the silent hear,
and those who do not remain
silent do not hear.”*

Joseph Pieper

a meal. If food is only there to meet our animal needs, it is something we must get, a desire we must temper by consumption, rather than an avenue of love and appreciation for the good things God has given. When we cook and share a meal, we are given a chance to reflect not only on the joy of companionship fostered by God's perishable gifts, but on how he offers us Himself as the imperishable food which offers a communion deeper and richer than anything here on earth.



the author and his younger sister



MEET THE AUTHORS



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May Andrew Rest In Peace.



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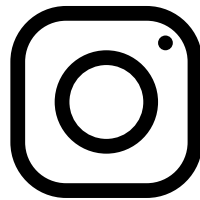
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