

Go in haste! Be amazed! Treasure!

Bishop Robert Barron

By now most of you are probably aware of the depressing statistics regarding the “nones,” that is to say, those in this country who claim no religious affiliation. The most recent survey showed that now fully one fourth of Americans belong to no religion at all – that’s approximately 80,000,000 people. And among those in the 18-29 age group, the percentage of nones goes up to 40!

This increase has been alarmingly precipitous. Fifty years ago, only a fraction of the country would have identified as unreligious, and even a decade ago, the number was only at 14 percent. What makes this situation even more distressing is that fully 64 percent of young adult nones were indeed raised religious but have taken the conscious and active decision to abandon their churches.

Houston, we definitely have a problem.

I have written frequently regarding practical steps that religious leaders ought to be taking to confront this rising tide of secularist ideology, and I will continue to do so. But for the moment, I would like to reflect on a passage from the Gospel of Luke, which was featured on the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God, and which sheds considerable light on this issue. It has to do with the visit of the shepherds to Mary and the Christ child in the stable at Bethlehem, and it hinges on three words: haste, astonished and treasured.

We hear that, upon receiving the angel’s message, the shepherds “went in haste” to visit the holy family. This echoes a passage from a bit earlier in Luke’s Gospel: having heard the news of her own pregnancy and that of Elizabeth, Mary, we are told, “went in haste” to the hill country of Judah to help her cousin. The spiritual truth that both of these pericopes disclose is that energy, verve, enthusiasm and a sense of mission come precisely from a good that is perceived to be both objective and transcendent to the ego.

If I might borrow the language of Dietrich von Hildebrand, it is only the objectively valuable – as opposed to the merely subjectively satisfying – that fills the mind and soul with passion and purpose. When the sense of objective and transcendent value is attenuated – as it necessarily is within the context of a secularist worldview – passion and mission fade away. John Henry Newman said that what gives a river verve and movement is precisely the firmness of its banks. When those banks are

broken down, in the interest of a supposed freedom, the once energetic body of water spreads out into a great lazy lake. What we have in our secularist culture, which denies the transcendent good, is a subjectivism that gives rise to the “whatever” attitude. Toleration and self-assertion reign supreme; but no one goes anywhere in haste. Rather, we all rest on our individual air mattresses in the midst of the placid but tedious lake.

The second word I want to emphasize is “astonished.” Luke tells us that those who heard the shepherds’ testimony were “astonished” at the news. The King James Version renders this as “they wondered at” the message. Wonder, amazement, and astonishment happen when the properly transcendent power breaks into our ordinary experience. The findings of the sciences delight and inform us, but they don’t astonish us, and the reason for this is that we are finally in control of the deliverances of the scientific method. We observe, we form hypotheses, we make experiments, and we draw conclusions. Again, this is all to the good, but it doesn’t produce amazement.

Dorothy Day witnessed to the astonishing when she said, upon the birth of her first child, that she felt a gratitude so enormous that it would correspond to nothing or no one in this world. Mother Teresa was properly amazed when, on a lengthy train journey to Darjeeling, she heard a voice calling her to minister to the poorest of the poor. The apostles of Jesus fell into wonder when they saw, alive again, their master who had been crucified and buried. These are the most precious kinds of experiences that we can have, and if St. Augustine is right, they alone can satisfy the deepest longing of the heart. A secularist ideology – the worldview embraced by the “nones” – produces the clean, well-lighted space of what we can know and control. But it precludes true astonishment, and this leaves the soul impoverished.

The final word from Luke upon which I’d like to reflect is “treasured.” The evangelist tells us that Mary “treasured these things, pondering upon them in her heart.” Newman said that Mary, precisely in this contemplative, ruminative frame of mind, is the model of all theology. I’d press it further. She is the real symbol of the Church in its entire function as the custodian of revelation. What is the Sistine Chapel? What is Notre Dame Cathedral? What is The Divine Comedy of Dante? What is the Summa contra gentiles of Thomas Aquinas? What are the sermons of John Chrysostom? What are the teachings of the great ecumenical councils? What is the liturgy in all of its complexity and beauty? These are all means by which the Church stubbornly, century in and century out, treasures the astonishing events of God’s self-

manifestation. Up and down the ages, the Church ponders what God has done so that the memory of these mighty deeds might never be lost. As such, she performs an indispensable service on behalf of the world—though the world might not have any sense of it. She keeps holding up the light against the darkness.

So to the “nones” and to those who are tempted to move into secularism, I say, don’t float on the lazy lake; rather, go in haste! Don’t settle for something less than astonishment; be amazed! Don’t fall into spiritual amnesia; treasure!

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