

A BAD CATHOLIC'S ESSAYS ON WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE WORLD

By Marc Barnes



Liguori

Imprimi Potest:

Stephen T. Rehrauer, CSsR, Provincial
Denver Province, the Redemptorists

Published by Liguori Publications
Liguori, Missouri 63057

Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists. To learn more about the Redemptorists, visit Redemptorists.com

To order, call 800-325-9521 or visit Liguori.org.

Copyright © 2017 Marc Barnes

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of Liguori Publications.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Barnes, Marc, author.

Title: A bad Catholic's essays on what's wrong with the world / by Marc Barnes.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017041241 | ISBN 9780764827099

Subjects: LCSH: Catholic Church—Doctrines—Blogs. | Christianity and culture—Blogs. | Theology, Doctrinal—Popular works. | Barnes, Marc—Blogs.

Classification: LCC BX1754 .B3425 2017 | DDC 282—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017041241>

Unless noted otherwise, Scripture texts in this work that are not included in Vatican documents are taken from the *New American Bible*, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC, and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the *New American Bible* may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Excerpts from Vatican documents are used with permission.

Copyright © 2017 *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*.

"Make Hell Hot Again" was originally published under the same title in *First Things*, August 2017. Reprinted with permission.

"The Gospel on Your iPad" was originally published as "The Screen and the Book," in *First Things*, May 2015. Reprinted with permission.

"Life Cycles" was originally published under the same title in *America* magazine, August 2015. Reprinted with permission.

Printed in the United States of America * 21 20 19 18 17/5 4 3 2 1 * First Edition

Cover design: Lorena Jimenez * Interior book design: Wendy Barnes

Cover and interior illustrations: NLshop / Shutterstock

CONTENTS

DEDICATION 5

CONTENTS 7

INTRODUCTION 9

CULTURE 15

The Difference Between a Naming and a Baptism 17

Being For 25

Christianity and the Claims of Eurocentrism 31

Catholics and Cultural Appropriation 37

Make Hell Hot Again 43

TECHNOLOGY 49

Netflix and the Culture of Choice 51

The Gospel on Your iPad 57



SEX 67

Celibacy in the LGBTQ Age 69

An Aside on Lust 79

Life Cycles 81

BECOMING CATHOLIC 91

The Divine Ascent of the Church Lady 93

How to Pray Badly 99

Those Horribly Sappy Saints 105

The Difference Between an Idiotic
and an Ecstatic Hierarchy 111

Religion and Changing the World 119



NETFLIX AND THE CULTURE OF CHOICE

If freedom is an exploding horizon of possible options, I'll take some mild form of oppression. The eternal possibility of another option isn't a space to stretch my arms and sing the national anthem—it is the paralysis of the human person into grotesque inaction. This is exemplified by Netflix.

To sit down and choose any movie out of the massive expanse of options Netflix offers is nearly impossible. Every choice is plagued by the immediate availability and advertised possibility of a better choice lurking in the scroll-down. The law, I think, is this: The longer it takes a group of friends to choose a single movie from the options available to them, the less appealing each choice looks. Every apprehended option speaks of better unapprehended options. We become saturated with possibility. The prospect of actually choosing something becomes a point of anxiety.

The idea that freedom blossoms from a mere diversity of choice and the constancy of another option becomes supremely suspect ten minutes into movie-searching, as we begin to



employ methods to protect ourselves from the abyss of choice—narrowing ourselves to five choices, employing a democratic voting system, setting ourselves a time limit, or forcing ourselves to remain in a genre. In short, we initiate processes of restriction and lawmaking. We begin our Netflix search as free-and-easy hipsters of the Choose-Whatever Generation—we end as fascists. And even with our self-restrictions, we usually end in frustration, saying, “Let’s just do this one!” We confess,

WE BEGIN OUR NETFLIX
SEARCH AS FREE-AND-
EASY HIPSTERS OF THE
CHOOSE-WHATEVER
GENERATION—WE END
AS FASCISTS.

in the end, that *any* option is better than wallowing in the paralysis of possible options.

But this paralysis is not cured by our eventual choice. Finally watching the movie is not characterized by relief. We do not rest in our choice. “If it’s really bad,” we say, “we can still choose another one.”

We watch our movie through the lens of another possibility that floats over our vision like a specter and makes the movie we watch the object of intense judgment. We are ready to abandon ship (at least until the movie sells itself to us).

It’s not that bad—is it? After all, this is an unusual situation. Usually you approach Netflix with some idea of what you want to watch, and this frame restricts your choice and saves you from paralysis. True—and that’s quite the point—but this isn’t really about Netflix.

Our culture is plagued (which only ever means *I* am plagued



and I believe it of others) with an aversion to the given—those people, places, and things that are given to us, annihilating the possibility of another person, another place, and another thing.

Marriage—legally and culturally speaking—is no longer a self-restriction of existence, by which I promise myself to another and thereby rip myself from the possibility of doing otherwise. The very possibility of divorce and prenuptial agreements keeps the door open to another possibility—a “better” way. Is it a surprise that my generation is moronic about the idea of marriage, and more than moronic, deathly frightened of ever choosing it, preferring the dialect of trying-it-out over till-death-do-us-part in our banal adventures in cohabitation? How difficult it is to choose an unfragmented, holistic life; how difficult it is to promise ourselves to something; how difficult it is to maintain that purity of heart that wills one thing (Kierkegaard) when the very air we breathe exalts the freedom of choice.

The myth is that we will be enabled to choose what we really want in this atmosphere. The reality is that we are terrified from choosing anything at all, and worse, that even in choosing we don’t choose—we try. What do we call a marriage open to the possibility of divorce? If it works, did it really work? If I die undivorced, did I stay faithful to my vows? Or did I try marriage out, right up to the point of death, a Netflix choice forever haunted by a possibly better option?

The awful is everywhere. It is in the way we work; we are expected to keep several jobs, to move often, to be ready to drop whatever it is we are doing at the whiff of a better option and a little more money. It is in the way we approach our bodies.



Gender is described as an open-ended possibility of virtually infinite choice, and we are encouraged at an early age to self-identify with a particular sexuality, gender, and orientation. Far and fading is the terrifying *given* of a body that must be reckoned with, creeping closer is the ocean of choice, the panic of which usually ends in a nondecision—a regular taking up of different sexualities, a lifelong toying with identity, or that paralysis by which we settle into the nondescriptiveness of being nothing at all. It is in the way we treat our communities—as inherently leavable for another option. It is in having children. Abortion allows us to try having kids instead of doing it. The logic of the people who support abortion is not some bizarre misdirection. It is a proper blossoming of a capitalistic misconception of freedom that the virtue of freedom is not in making the right choice but in the possibility of choice itself—the supposed “power” of consumers and their promise of satisfaction. And so we are “pro-choice.” The possibility of another option to pregnancy is a value in itself—even when that other option involves killing a child.

This, this is the millennial farce. We are tourists of our hometowns, dilettantes of our work, taste testers of our relationships, and brief visitors of the geography of our own bodies, all permanence and givenness haunted and negated by the siren song of somewhere, someone, something else. We indulge the same illusion that a Netflix party indulges—that more possibilities will make us happy, increasing our chances of making the right choice and ending up satisfied. But as with Netflix, choice as an open-ended category paralyzes us from ever really *doing* anything. And when we do lurch into action,



the possibility of another option haunts our decisions and transforms them into tentative tests. We never really annihilate ourselves from the primordial soup of possibility.

The opposite of this mode of being is adventure, a mode I would roughly define as a knock on your door that makes you get off your ass to do something. Adventure is a synthesis of freedom and necessity—a free, creative dealing with what is *given*. It involves reckoning with what you do not choose. We would do well to make use of G.K. Chesterton’s formula here, that an adventure is only an inconvenience rightly considered. An inconvenience is given as an annihilation of other possibilities. It is an inconvenience to be born into a particular family and a particular body; to have a home in a particular place, a vocation to this particular man or woman, or a project of work no one else can do.

An inconvenience rightly considered is not haunted by the possibility of another choice. It is a restriction. We cannot do otherwise. We promise not to do otherwise. We are made terribly responsible.

Adventure is a mode fundamentally opposed to the paralysis of our culture. Against the vagueness of being able to do anything at all, against the absurdity of placing value in the mere ability to choose something else, adventure is an acceptance of what is given in all its thorniness, tragedy, and splendor. To be on an adventure is to reduce, to limit, to burn

WE NEVER REALLY
ANNIHILATE OURSELVES
FROM THE PRIMORDIAL
SOUP OF POSSIBILITY.



the bridges that no one else can burn at the terrible expense of any “other choice” or “better place.” In this is our profound, existential experience of freedom.

Freedom chooses its necessities. Paradoxically, we are most certain that we are free when we freely determine ourselves; when we take care of the land we belong to and destroy in ourselves the possibility of moving; when we make a vow and keep it; when we give ourselves a moral law and obey it; when we admit that we, without our choosing, have been given to a family and a community and give ourselves to them. Freedom is felt when we destroy “the other option.”

A life made sharp by the vow, the promise, the firm decision and the whittling of that glut of possibility into the narrow point of actuality—I want it. I want to cease coddling an extended not-doing and nonchoosing, to stop indulging that constant potency which, for the mere fact of its ending in death, we call a life. Who is free, finally? The man who knows that no action of his ever annihilates the possibility to do otherwise, or the monk who vows poverty, chastity, and obedience?

