

Charles Chaput, *Strangers in a strange land*, Henry Holt Co, New York, NY, 2017.

This book is a critical description of contemporary America. More precisely it focuses on the changes which have occurred in America in recent decades especially as regards socio-cultural, moral and Christian-Catholic life. As the title suggests, Christian values and practices, once prevalent in American society, have become strange and at odds with the present American way of life.

In the first two chapters, the author recognizes, among the other things, American exceptionalism as compared to Western Europe. Specifically, in the area of Christian faith, America had found a way to combine two different and often conflicting factors: the biblical tradition and the rational approach of the Enlightenment. In comparison to Europe, America has been generally recognized as more religious. The situation in America has recently seen dramatic changes, however, as stated by the author: «We live in a country very different from that of the past» (p. 3). These changes include the composition of the population in quantity and quality, technological progress, the disintegration of the family, the legal sys-

tem and, especially, a cultural revolution that considers Christian values as obsolete and anti-democratic. Just to take a few examples: the author quotes the US Supreme Court ruling in 2015 on same sex marriages and, thus: «Our failure to pass along our faith in a compelling way to the generation now taking our place» (p. 7). The changes that have occurred in recent decades are so profound that it would be «an illusion to restore America to the way it once was» (p. 44), as evidenced in the chapters that follow, three through seven.

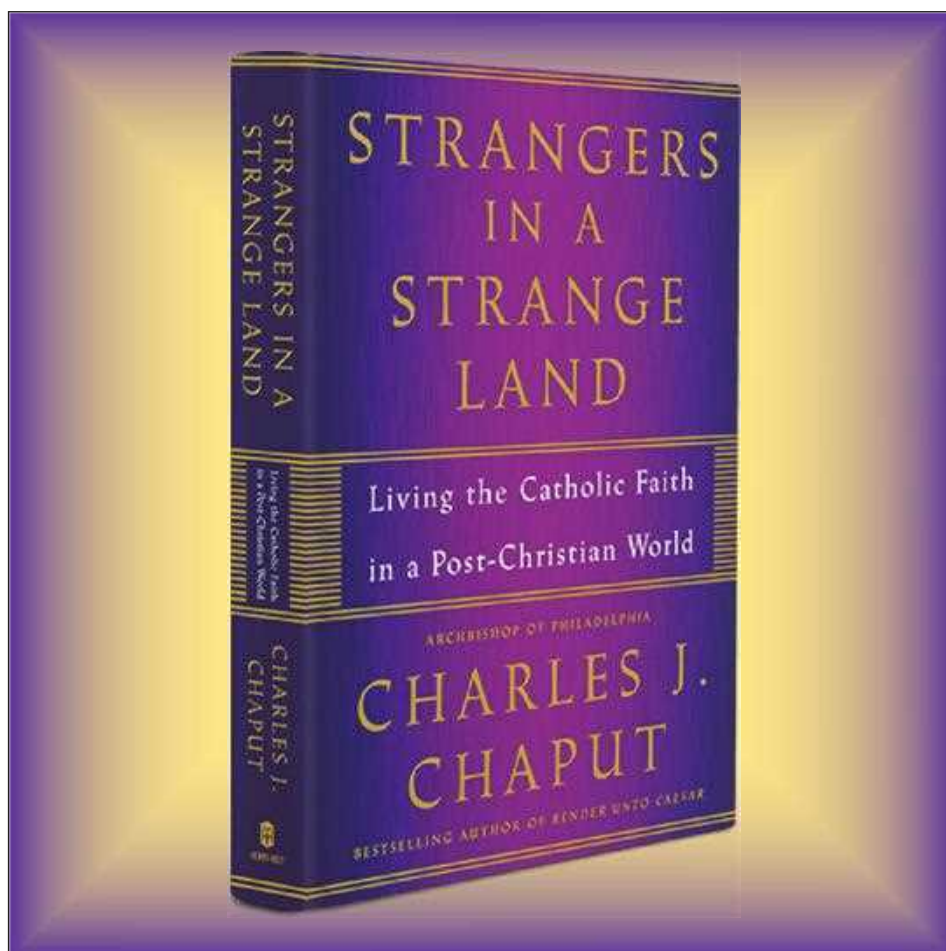
This does not mean that Christianity is going to disappear and/or become meaningless. Christianity has strong foundations and is not going to concede that God is dead or simply relegated to the private realm, as the liberal culture pretends it to be. From chapter 8 to the final 12th chapter, the reader will find reasons for hope and confidence. The theological Christian virtue of hope excludes both presumption and despair (p. 148): «Whereas hope is rooted in faith and gives birth to love, de-

spair and presumption are rooted in pride». (p. 153). The message of hope, as described in chapter 8, is followed by chapter 9, entitled «Rules for Radicals», which proclaims the Beatitudes as a goal that is impossible to achieve for men but not for God. Chapter 10 reminds us that Christianity is not just a religion for individuals, as the modern atheistic culture would like to claim, favored by a false concept of freedom and toleration, but it comes as a family and as a Church, in spite of her sins. Faith reveals that God is searching for us and the Church is part of that revelation, «an antidote to the isolation and radical individualism of modern democratic life» (p. 188). The book concludes with two final chapters, one of them commenting on the apologetic Letter to Diognetus of the primitive Church. The author chooses to recall this apostolic text of the 2nd century by an anonymous Christian author in suggesting the recipe to use in coping with the moral decadence of XXI century America. As Christians were looked upon as strangers and often blamed and persecuted during the time of the Roman empire, so this appears to be the case in contemporary America, where Christian values have become strange to the present culture, dominated as it is by the liberal mass media and sustained by an individualistic, selfish consumerist society. Confronted with similar problems, the solutions remain the same: living the Christian faith authentically is the best and only recipe for the healing process of both individuals and society. The final chapter starts by recalling the beauty of creation, and its supreme being, man, created in the image of God. It is in the discovery or re-discovery of what man really is, according to the plan of God, no matter how strange that may appear to postmodern America, that the real answer to today's many problems lies.

The book has plenty of references and quotations taken from an impressive number of sources, ancient and modern, Christian and secular, which demonstrate, among the other things, a profound knowledge and familiarity on the part of the author with different fields such as theology, philosophy and the social sciences, as well as of historical and current events. I would recommend this book to

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any person questioning the present condition of man today, especially in relation to Christian- Catholic life. I would consider it also a useful tool for students and scholars interested in the many cultural and religious changes that America and the world are going through.

In the third part of the book, the author widens his analysis to the broader social field of Western civilization. The marginalization of Christianity to the private realm is bringing Western civilization to a new barbarism. «God is socially dead» (p. 251). This reality appears particularly true in Europe having disowned, among other things, her Christian roots by refusing to recognize the Christian tradition in her constitution and denying, in such a way, historical evidence. «We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely in one's own ego and desires», as said by Cardinal Ratzinger in *Pro eligendo Romano Pontifice*, April 18, 2005, (quoted by the author, p. 251). «Evil, violence, crimes, and sexual perversion have always existed», the author reminds us, but «what rules now is an institutionalized hedonistic culture that threatens human life tomorrow» (p. 283). And this culture is now transmitted to the other parts of the planet in a sort of «cultural colonization» (p. 284), a concept which recalls the expression of Pope Francis when he speaks of a new ideological colonialism. In the last chapter of the third part, the author writes on the topic of religious liberty, which is very much under attack today by the very same «democratic liberal ideology through the use of persecution by media and indoctrination from earliest childhood» (p. 288).

The fourth part, the shortest of the book, suggests a remedy to the somber situation depicted of the Church and of the West. In the last two chapters, 17 and 18, the author recalls the remedy of the Gospel. We do not need to invent a new program: «*The program already exists*», it is the plan found in the Gospel. We have to re-discover the forgotten virtues which have the power to heal the Church and society, beginning with prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice. Building a world of virtue will be the remedy to our moral and social ailments. In addition, for Christians, it is imperative to re-discover the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity which guarantee and bring to a higher level the above-mentioned cardinal virtues.

The author's thesis, aimed at demon-



strating the present moral decadence of the Church and of the world and their intertwining connections, is extensive and well documented by numerous quotations, especially from the writings of recent Popes. The most quoted appears to be Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, with writings and discourses produced both during his papacy and before that as a cardinal and professor. Nevertheless, this precise, severe, meticulous and long negative analysis of Christian life and of Western society risks providing a partial picture of the present situation, as it tends to over emphasize problems, dangers and evils and does not sufficiently identify and develop the good «signs of the time». In some ways, this analysis recalls the condemnation of modernity, as depicted

by the Popes of the XIX century, mainly Gregory XVI and Pius IX, who courageously denounced the evil, liberal, godless mentality of the time but missed distinguishing some potentially positive aspects of secularization, giving the impression that the Church is intrinsically against modernity. This book is nevertheless a precious tool in understanding the real, contemporary crisis of Christian life and beyond, and, as such, I would highly recommend it to clergy, catechists, and to any person interested in the well-being of the Church and of society, especially in the West.

