

RONALD ROLHEISER - TWO REFLECTIONS FOR ADVENT

The Fire Inside

In every cell of our bodies and in the very DNA of our souls we ache for someone or something that we haven't yet known, in a way that leaves us dissatisfied and restless inside our own skins. Our lives always seem too small for us. Moreover, and this is the key, this is God's doing. God is the hand behind this "*intolerable shirt of flame*", as T. S. Eliot puts it.

The fire inside us comes from the way God made us, namely, to crave the infinite and to be dissatisfied with everything else until that love is consummated. Thus, the fire inside us will never be extinguished simply by attaining the right partner, the right job, the right set of friends, or the right recognition. We will always be on fire.

When Saint Augustine says: "*You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you,*" he is, of course, pointing out why God made us this way. It is a guarantee that we will never be satisfied with anything less than the infinite and the eternal.

Advent celebrates human longing. It asks us not to deny our longings but to enter them, deepen them, and widen them until we undergo a metamorphosis.

Longing shapes the soul in many ways, particularly by helping create the space within us where God can be born. Longing leads us to the stable and the manger of Bethlehem. It carves out a trough into which God can be born.

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Healthy Chastity

In his controversial book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, American educator Allan Bloom suggests that lack of chastity is the leading cause of unhappiness among young people. His thesis runs something like this: "*I look at the students I teach, young 20-year-olds, and I see most everything, except happiness. Young people have been everywhere and experienced everything. But they have never had anything sublime in their lives because sublimity depends upon waiting and waiting depends upon chastity. Whatever else they may have had in life, they have never had these: sublimity, waiting, and chastity.*"

It's interesting to see chastity so defended by a purely secular analyst because today in Western culture chastity is for the most part denigrated in the arts, intellectual circles, and popular culture. Among many of the novelists, critics, and even religious people that I read, preaching chastity isn't just backwards and naive - it's evil, a kind of reverse pornography.

But a healthy chastity is not so much about sex as it is about reverence and respect. It is not just about what we experience, but also about when we experience it. An experience can be wrong simply because it is premature. Chastity, in the end, is about waiting, about trying to carry all things, not just sex, at a more sublime level. To surround anything with proper reverence is to say that it's important. Waiting and chastity, these are not the virtues of our time. **Advent is the season that celebrates these virtues, both by pointing desire towards its adequate object and by teaching us to wait.**

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