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Catholic Book Reviews Monthly

Book Reviews to Help You Grow in Your Faith

Current Review

Behold the Man: A Catholic Vision of Male Spirituality. By Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers, Ignatius Press, 2015.

Subverted: How I Helped the Sexual Revolution Hijack the Women's Movement. By Sue Ellen Browder, Ignatius Press, 2015.

The intertwining of gender and religious issues is increasingly discussed in both scholarly and popular circles. In two recent books, Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers and Ellen Browder both address religious and gender issues, but in very different ways and from distinctly contrasting perspectives. Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers, affectionately nicknamed “the Dynamic Deacon,” is a popular Catholic speaker and writer. He lives in Oregon with his wife and four children, and speaks extensively on family life. Ellen Browder is a freelance writer who worked for publications such as *Cosmopolitan*, and wrote extensively about the women’s movement and the sexual revolution as they happened.

[Behold the Man](#) is directed towards men, but women will be interested in reading it to hear Burke-Sivers’ message of how men can be better fathers and husbands. This book is meant to challenge its readers, and to stimulate men behave in a better, wiser, and more holy manner. Burke-Sivers writes about the pernicious and ultimately damaging effects of the culture created by the social shifts covered by Browder, and determines that men increasingly have to believe in a counter-cultural manner in order to protect those closest to them and to be the best possible versions of themselves that they can be.

Early in his book, Burke-Sivers writes:

“When men allow the culture to shape their consciences in accord with its false truths, the results within the family and society are devastating...”

A culture rooted in subjective truth says that love does not mean commitment, self-gift, and sacrifice. Instead, love means whatever you decide it to mean. Nowhere is this more evident than in the classic cultural affirmation “If it feels good, do it.” Marching to the anthem of relativism, men “play the field,” fornicating frequently with multiple partners and engaging in extramarital affairs, sometimes resulting in the birth of children that these men, for the most part, have no interest in raising or financially supporting. There exists an entire generation of fathers who have physically, emotionally, or spiritually abandoned their wives and children. Thus, in the absence of fathers to lead, support, and nurture their families, women have compensated either by assuming masculine roles within the family or by constructing innovative support networks for themselves and their children. This changing dynamic has brought us to a critical juncture as men: we are at the genesis or a systematic and fundamental shift in family life where in the near future, if we continue to live as men of the culture, fathers in the family may be considered optional and, in many cases, unnecessary.”

Burke-Sivers uses a wide variety of sources to bolster his points. Scripture is cited many times, and he turns to scientific studies as well to show the effects of the breakdown of the family. He also references popular culture, such as episodes of *Two and a Half Men*, in order to gauge the current state of society and how Hollywood shapes the ordinary person's opinions on sex and behavior. By far, however, the most poignant and meaningful passages come from when Burke-Sivers draws upon his own life, such as when he describes how his relationship with his father, who abandoned the family, was healed by his father's conversion; or how Burke-Sivers counseled a parishioner whose marriage was being destroyed by a pornography addiction. The book's greatest scene contains a gift and a moral that has been most popularly depicted in *Les Misérables*, as we see Burke-Sivers describe a crushing sacrifice that might have derailed his career, but ultimately wound up helping to repair his brother's life.

Throughout the book, Burke-Sivers insists that to be a real man, a man must live his life rooted in a strong sense of morality, and engage in an unceasing struggle to continually improve himself and to consistently strive to achieve holiness. Therefore, faith and spirituality are crucial to men's lives. He writes:

"What, then, is Catholic male spirituality? It is a man's response to God's invitation to life-giving communion through an ever-deepening revelation and discovery of Him via a life of sacrifice and service that imitates Christ crucified, meditates on God's Word and responds to that Word in faith, and, through the Holy Spirit and in the sacraments, makes him truly a son of God and part of the Mystical Body of Christ. An authentic male spirituality is first and foremost an encounter, that is, an encounter with the Living God in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the quintessential example of what it means to be a man. Catholic male spirituality is truly genuine when it is "a spirituality centered in Jesus Christ and through him to the Trinity..." To be authentically spiritual means that we must enter into the life of Christ and transform our hearts, minds, and wills to that of the Lord's;. Since it is only through Christ that we can receive salvation, a truly genuine Catholic spirituality for men must be Christ-centered at its very core, faithful to the deposit of faith, and obedient to the Church's Magisterium."

If Burke-Sivers writes to a general audience about how spirituality affects men and how a lack of it can leave men and their families damaged and adrift; Browder uses her memoir to explain how her years of writing sex and relationship-advice columns during the sexual revolution, along with insufficient religious grounding in her life, affected her and her family. Had her marriage not have been so strong, her relationship with her husband and children might have been destroyed, like many others were. At its heart, *Subverted* is a love story between Browder and her husband, both in professional writing careers that take major tolls on them. Indeed, Browder started her journalism career expecting excitement and glamour, and in retrospect views much of her work without any affection or warm nostalgia. She writes:

"I can give you no justification for what I did in my former life. I will only say this in my weak defense: I was a young woman searching for truth, freedom, and meaning in the world, but I had no clue where to find them. I grew up as a small-town Iowa girl and passionately desired to escape from the prison of small-mindedness I perceived around me. My dad owned a small family show store, where my stay-at-home mom worked part-time. I was baptized at age nine, and we went to church every Sunday. Once a year or so, parishioners at my little white Congregational Church passed around tiny thimble-sized glasses of grape juice for what was called "communion." I didn't know what that was, and nobody told me. If New Hampton (population 3,456) had its virtues, and I'm sure it did, I couldn't see them. Something or Someone bigger was calling to my heart, but I had no idea who or what it might be."

In this autobiography, Browder explains how her role at *Cosmopolitan* initially seemed like a dream job. Led by Helen Gurley Brown, whose work championed women having sex without consequences, life in the big city seemed like the most exciting thing possible. Like many dreams, it eventually turned nightmarish.

"The position paid only \$105 a week. But the pitifully low pay, even for those days, mattered not a twit to me. In my mind, the job—assistant to the articles editor of Cosmopolitan!—was a

small-town girl's dream come true.

Only later would I realize how dark the dream had become. Eventually, it would lead to a cacophony of mixed, confused messages in our culture about women, work, sex, marriage, and relationships— errors that have divided our nation and continue to haunt us to this day. It would lead me to make disastrous decisions...

From 1970 on, I was right there in the heart of the sexual revolution in New York City, working first on staff at Cosmopolitan and for the next twenty-four years as a freelance writer for the magazine, where I told lie upon lie to sell the casual-sex lifestyle to millions of single, working women...

My small observation was this: In the beginning, the women's movement and the sexual revolution were distinctly separate cultural phenomena."

Subverted contains a concise history of the postwar women's movement and the push for legalized abortion. Many people may not be aware of the details of how some of these movements were controlled by a small group of well-funded, well-organized, well-connected people, and this book illustrates that such social changes were not inevitable, and were fueled in part by bad scholarship and the credulity of the media and people in power who really ought to have been far more skeptical of the declarations made by the proponents of the sexual revolution.

As with Burke-Sivers' book, the strongest parts of the book come from personal experience. We see Browder's increasing dissatisfaction with her job and her husband's struggles with his novelist and screenwriter careers, her relationships with her children, and how she gradually lost faith in the words *Cosmopolitan* insisted that she write. The defining emotional moment of the book comes from a decision Browder and her husband made that would ultimately alter the direction of her life and mental health, but it also became a driving force in helping her redirect her life and led to her religious conversion.

Browder's book is a cautionary tale and a convert's journey. Burke-Sivers' work is a call to action and a demand that his readers do better as men and family members. He writes:

"Where do we go from here? What changes are you going to make today, next week, next month? Men of God, the Catholic man is not an endangered species! Let us clean out the caverns and dark places of our lives so that Jesus may come and make His home with us. Let us get past our preoccupation with the materiality of the world and allow God's power and peace, God's love and life, to draw us into a place where there is nothing standing between us and Him. Let us give ourselves over to God's will and have the courage to prefer absolutely nothing to the love of Christ."

Though these books are very different, they both boil down to a man and a woman explaining just how crucial faith is to people's lives and how horribly society can suffer by a lack of faith. Though Ignatius Press has not been promoting these books in tandem, they make for excellent companion pieces, and reading one enriches the experience of reading the other.

—Chris Chan

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