



Darkness at Noon and the Light of Christ

Artwork by Alicia Laxton

In 1972, a man brandishing a hammer and screaming, “I’m Jesus Christ! I have risen from the dead!” attacked Michelangelo’s *Pieta* in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, doing considerable damage to the marble statue’s eye, veil, nose, and left arm.

The strange incident stunned the world, including art lovers and spiritual pilgrims who gathered that day to view the *Pieta*, an exquisite masterpiece depicting a suffering Mary gazing down at the dead body of her Son, which she cradles in her lap.

Upon learning of the vandalism, the Pope added another dimension to the matter, calling it “most serious moral damage”.

These reactions, and others, demonstrate the *Pieta*’s ability to evoke strong emotions. Hungarian-born British novelist Arthur Koestler seemed to know this when he featured the *Pieta* in his famous novel, *Darkness at Noon*. The story, which takes place in Eastern Europe during the Soviet purge of the late 1930s, centers on an old-guard Bolshevik whose reversal of fortune is sudden and extreme: he is not only thrown in prison on trumped-up charges but, while there, is haunted by his past.

Anticipating what is ahead, Rubashov paces his cell, resolving not to panic. Instead, he rationally takes stock of the events of his forty-year career, a process he calls “thinking things through to the end”.

No sooner has Rubashov begun to pace and think than he catches a glimpse of a fellow prisoner beseeching the guards for food: “the disquieting sign of those thin arms and cupped hands, which vaguely reminded him of something he could not define. He didn’t know what it was, only that it had been a long time, but the outline of those outstretched hands and even the shadow of them seemed familiar—some familiar image that had wafted in from his memory. . . .”

And suddenly, he remembers:



Pieta . . . A Monday afternoon inside a museum in the middle of Germany. Not a soul was present apart from Rubashov and the young man he had traveled to meet. Their conversation took place on a round plush sofa in the center of an empty gallery whose walls

were draped with tons of heavy female flesh by Flemish masters.

Striding back and forth in his cell, memories flood Rubashov’s mind: the bewildered expression and slumped shoulders of the low-level operative whom the Par-

ty wanted dead; the profile of two young lovers standing close together in front of the painting; the crane of his neck as he strained to get a good look at the *Pieta*, not just a glimpse of her “cupped hands and two thin arms, cut off at the elbows”.

This *analepsis* (flashback) museum scene becomes the story’s central *motif*. Every time Rubashov tries to rationalize the revolution’s murderous means or defend his sinful misdeeds for the Party, that is, to “think things through to the end”, he is stopped short. The upturned hands and thin arms mentally assault him.

Soon, Rubashov is overwhelmed with physicality, chiefly his own. His hand twitches involuntarily at night as he sleeps and shakes during the day due to nicotine withdrawal. He tosses and turns in nightmarish sleep, awakening each time to sweat-drenched clothing. He develops a nagging toothache that throbs every time he recalls the many innocent people he has betrayed—such as a loyalist the Party scapegoated for a failed operation or the innocent secretary Rubashov refused to defend.

But most of all, he is haunted by the *Pieta*: her vulnerability was her strength; her suffering was her witness. Try as he might, Rubashov cannot ignore her.

In the end, Rubashov stays true to the Party, as this is not a conversion narrative *per se*. He pleads guilty to false charges of treason and, exhausted and resigned, descends the prison cellar stairs to take a bullet to the back of the head. His last thoughts are quasi-confessional:

Perhaps there was a mistake . . . in the whole system of calculation. He had suspected as much for a long time, ever since Richard and *the Pieta*, but had never dared to admit it to himself.

Continuing on, he concludes:

Looking back, it seemed he had spent forty years in a mad frenzy—in a rampage of pure reason. Perhaps it wasn’t healthy for people to cut off the old ties, to disengage the brakes of “Thou shalt not”, and “Thou mayest not”, and go racing off toward their goal unchecked. . . . There was an error in the system, perhaps even in the proposition he had hitherto accepted as incontestable in whose name he had sacrificed others. He himself would be sacrificed—the proposition that the

end justifies the means. It was this tenet that had killed the great fraternity of the revolution, and had turned them all into mad, frenzied men.

Rubashov gets it partially right. There was indeed an “error in the system” of communism, but not a minor one that could be tuned or tweaked. On the contrary, the entire enterprise rested on a false premise. One cannot, as Rubashov discovered, simply “think things through to the end”, for what lies at the end of it is “a mad frenzy” and a “rampage of pure reason”.

In his 1997 papal encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II elucidates why. The encyclical builds a case for a “Gospel of life which is to be preached with dauntless fidelity as ‘good news’ to the people of every age and culture”. This Gospel, the Holy Father writes, is not fundamentally *propositional* but *incarnational*: finding its origins in the birth of Christ, the Son of God, its missional purpose in the Spirit of God, and, finally, its extension to the Church, in the family of God.

The Polish Pope’s strong anti-communist position was not centered on *realpolitik* or even propositional truths from Scripture but on his anthropology, his theology of the human person. A chief concern of his was the widespread modern misunderstanding of man’s essential nature. This gross misunderstanding is what the Pope had in mind when he wrote:

The body is no longer perceived as a properly personal reality, sign, and place of relations with others, God, and the world. It is reduced to pure materiality: it is simply a complex of organs, functions, and energies to be used according to the sole criteria of pleasure and efficiency.

Pope John Paul died at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but his insights could not be more relevant today. His answer to assaults on human personhood: look to the Eucharist.

In his papal encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, the Pope writes that the Eucharist is:

“The source and summit of the Christian life”, for “The most holy Eucharist contains the Church’s entire spiritual wealth: Christ himself, our Passover, and living bread. Through his own flesh, now made living and life-giv-

ing by the Holy Spirit, he offers life to men.” Consequently, the gaze of the Church is constantly turned to her Lord, present in the Sacrament of the Altar, in which she discovers the full manifestation of his boundless love.

In *Darkness at Noon*, we see a suffering mother gazing at the body of her sacrificed Son. Repeatedly the text points back to her supplication (outstretched hands) and weakness (thin arms). These very images, ironically, capture the imagination of the grizzled Soviet general, Rubashov, who goes to his death doubting the righteousness of the ideologically-driven, totalitarian movement that had proved so destructive and murderous to so many.

Similarly, Christians the world over draw strength and purpose from the Gospel not as an ideologically-driven, propositional doctrine but as the Words of Life. The Gospel’s good news for humanity is that our bodies are not disposable material to exploit and discard but precious gifts to enjoy for God’s glory.

Today, eighty years after the show trials, purges, and the first edition of Koestler’s novel, authoritarianism threatens human freedom through globalist agendas, national pandemic policies, or the renewal of war on European soil.

As we witness denigrations of personhood, including human rights violations, abortion, transgenderism, and even transhumanism, we may wonder if darkness has eclipsed our noon-day sun.

But hope abounds. We who find life in Christ, who gather strength in eating his flesh and drinking his blood in the Holy Sacrament, can learn a valuable lesson from the *Pieta*. Real strength comes not from brute force, “pure reason”, or political ideology but from thin arms and cupped hands.

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