

## **“The Battle for Your Mind” – Into His Likeness by Dr. Edward Sri**

Right now, there’s a battle going on for your mind – for how you look at reality. Who are you? What is life all about? What brings happiness? What is true success? What is love? Who is God? What happens after we die?

These are some of the most fundamental questions in life, and the world is doing everything it can to get you to look at them a certain way, while Christ offers you a very different perspective. Which outlook on life will you adopt? From the beginning of Christianity, St. Paul warned us to get ready for this battle, saying, “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of you *mind*” (Rom. 12:2, emphasis added).

In our modern age especially, we need to constantly put before our minds the most important truths, the highest truths, the ones that matter most. Unfortunately, many Christians who go to Mass each Sunday, pray often, and sincerely want to follow Christ are the same people who fill their minds the rest of the week with conversations, blogs, and videos that undermine their faith. The problem is not simply that these alternative ways of looking at things such as life, love, beauty, money or sex, for example, are coming from secular, non-Christian sources. The bigger issue is that the outlook presented by much of the secular entertainment, education, and the media industries today is directly opposed to what Jesus reveals.

And we are foolishly naïve if we think it doesn’t affect us.

### **What We Put in Our Minds Matters**

What we put in our minds matters. We’re made in such a way that what we put in our minds *changes us*. It shapes how we look at reality and what we perceive as good and true and beautiful. Hence, it influences our desires and what we want to pursue in life. It shapes who we become. To think that what we read, what we watch, and what we listen to doesn’t affect us is simply to be out of touch with reality.

Consider, for example, how the world views romantic love. The modern world often trains us to think of love as being about *what I get out of the other person*, whether it be feelings, emotions, sensual pleasure, or a sense of not being alone. The focus is not primarily on the good of the other person, but on what that person does for me. “I love you” thus tends to mean “I get powerful feelings from you,” or “I have a lot of fun with you,” or “I get sexual pleasure from you.” But what happens when the relationship gets challenging: when the feelings fades, the fun times go away, or your beloved can get sexual pleasure somewhere else? Will your beloved still be there for you? Deep down we know that in this kind of love the other person is not really committed to you for how you are. They’re just committed to *what they get out of you*.

This view of love is very different from what Jesus reveals. Authentic love is not so self-centered. It’s not about what another person does for me. True love is outward looking: it’s about seeking what’s best for another person. That’s how the *Catechism* defines love: “to will the good of another.” Jesus models this love for us most especially on the Cross. Jesus doesn’t get a lot out of being crucified on Calvary. Jesus doesn’t get a lot of warm feelings, have a fun time, or get a lot of enjoyment out of dying on the Cross. He suffers much as he gives himself completely for us. That’s what real love looks like. It’s about someone being truly committed to you for who you are – not for how you look, how you perform, or what you do for them.

This kind of authentic love, however, is not often portrayed in most movies, love songs, news reports, advertisements, and articles that people encounter today. That's in part why even good Christians face much confusion, disillusionment, and hurt in their dating relationships and marriages. Even though they've heard the Christian message about love, they've allowed their minds to be filled with Hollywood's version of love. Many young devout Catholics, for example, have admitted that, even though they know pre-marital sex is wrong, they still wonder if they're missing something by not having sex with their boyfriend or girlfriend because, as one young adult put it, "that's how all the beautiful love stories we see in the movies end – with the lovers in bed with each other. It makes me wonder if I'm missing out on something in my relationship."

But it's not just Christian college students and young professionals who are so swayed by the culture. I've met smart, professional, successful married people in their 30s and 40s who are confused and struggling in their marriages in large part because of how they've taken in the world's view of love. I remember one Christian woman, for example, telling me, "I've been so disillusioned with my relationship with my husband these last five years because I've been wondering *why my marriage isn't turning out like all those love songs I listen to.*" Notice that her standard for love and for her marriage wasn't the Bible, Jesus, or the Church. It was the music she listens to from pop culture.

This is why we must be very careful about what we put in our minds. As Archbishop Charles Chaput has emphasized, "We need to *read* – above all the Word of God, but also history and biographies and great novels. If we don't read, we condemn ourselves to chronic stupidity and conditioning by mass media that have no sympathy for the things we believe. Television is not a channel for serious thought. It's often just the opposite. And the internet, for all its advantages, is too often a source of isolation... If we fill our heads with poison and junk, we make ourselves angry and dumb." He's certainly not saying we should never watch TV or we should avoid the Internet. But he is challenging us to be much more discerning about what we take in from the Culture.

Here's one simple thing you can do to assess whether what you're filling your mind with is good or bad for your soul: Make a list of the shows, movies, music, and books you like most. Then consider what St. Paul wrote in Phillipians 4:8: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." And ask yourself if what you are taking in is true, honorable, pure, and lovely. Would you look at or listen to this if Jesus were in the room with you?

### **Highest Truths**

One of the biggest challenges in our modern age is that it focuses all our attention only on this world, on what we can see. We get caught up in the pressures of life – worrying about what other people think of us, maintaining an image, building our career, making sure our kids get all the right experiences, pursuing the honors, riches, comforts, and pleasures of this world – and we become driven by the fear of missing out on what everyone else is doing. The secular environment gets us to focus on these present realities so much that we forget the spiritual realities that govern the universe and matter most in our lives.

Yet our faith tells us the most important part of the universe is spiritual reality which is beyond our senses: Angelic beings that surround us Moment by moment, the Holy Spirit was present to us, the life of Grace in our hearts, and our own spiritual Souls that will last forever. Keeping these invisible realities in mind is far more important than keeping up with what is trending on social media.

In the movie adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's popular novel *The Hobbit*, the main character Bilbo Baggins is on his way to fight the evil dragon Smaug on the Lonely Mountain. But to get there, he has to travel with his friends on an Epic Journey that involves passing through a dark Forest filled with many dangers. For

days, Bilbo and his companions never see the song. The impressively thick forest is almost asphyxiated. And when they fall off the main path, they're discouraged, not sure they're heading in the right direction and uncertain of what might come next.

But in this moment, Bilbo decides to climb up to the top of a tall tree and rise above the oppressive Forest. He sees the Blue Sky, breathe the fresh air, and looks all around. His perspective changes completely. He can suddenly see everything. He sees where he came from when he first entered the forest. He can get a better sense of where he is now. And, to his great Delight, he can see for the first time in the distance the goal of his journey: The Lonely Mountain.

In our modern era that focuses just on this world - the honors, Comforts, Pursuits, and pleasures of this World - we easily lose sight of the most important realities: where we came from, where we are right now, and where we are going. Like Bilbo, we need to take the effort to climb the trees - to rise above the Dark Forest of the secular culture that looks only at what it can see and distracts us from what's truly most important. With great effort, care, and attention, we need to raise our minds intentionally to the highest truths that God has revealed to us so that we can see our lives as they really are.

### **The Real Story**

For a moment, consider these basic but most beautiful truths: God, who was perfectly happy and glorious in himself, freely chose to create the universe to share in his goodness and his love with others. But before God made the cosmos, the Earth, the sky and sea, and human beings, he created the invisible universe: angels. The angels are spiritual, non-bodily beings. Even though we can't see them, they are more powerful than anything on Earth. At the dawn of creation, so against God led by one of their own, named Lucifer, who must have been so very beautiful and Powerful if he was able to convince other creatures to do the most foolish thing they could ever do: rebelled against their own Creator!

These rebellious angels, known as the demons, hate God and everything God loves. When God created human beings to share his love, Lucifer wanted to destroy this beautiful Union that the Human family had with God. He tempted our first parents and convince them to join his Rebellion. After that, the Human family was continuously oppressed by him - until Jesus came.

God sent his son to become one of us, to die on the cross and liberate us from sin, death, and Satan's dominion. Satan still tries to Lure us back to his ways. Because of Original Sin, we are wounded and have an inclination toward evil. Resisting temptation is still an ongoing struggle but Christ came to restore our community with the Father and send his Spirit into our hearts and call us to prayer, the sacraments, and fellowship, and to form our minds in the truth so that we can follow his disciples and not follow the ways of this world, the ways of the enemy. That's why our work of being disciples and leading others to follow Christ is, in reality, the most important thing we can do.

Keeping these fundamental truths at the forefront of our minds is far more important than knowing what's on the news, what video is everyone is watching, or how our favorite team is doing. It's also more important than advancing their career, making more money, improving our golf swing, signing our kids up for summer activities, or building up our savings fund. There's nothing wrong with any of these things, but do they merit most of our attention to the point of crowding out higher spiritual truths that offer us the greatest illumination up for our path in life?

### **How to Form Your Mind**

Now, let's get practical. What should we be doing to form our minds?

First, there are two basic texts which should be a part of the regular diet every Catholic disciple: The Bible and the *Catechism*. We should take time to read and study the Bible, for in it we encounter God's inspired Word to us in scripture. We also should take time to learn what's the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which is the church's official presentation of the Faith. Knowing the Bible and the *Catechism* better will help us to see reality more clearly. While some people may think of Faith as a leap in the dark, we should see these two important texts as a step into the light. They help us to see things as they really are under point us towards true happiness in life. As the psalmist expresses "your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (PS 119:105).

Second, we can take time to read good books that help us to contemplate and better understand prayer, the moral life, and the mysteries of Faith - who God is, Jesus, the Church, the sacraments, the Last Things. The more we learn about God and what he has revealed, the more we can give ourselves to him in love and allow his Revelation to guide our lives. When we gain a deeper understanding of God's plan or a particular virtue or truth that we hadn't grasped before, it challenges us to live according to that truth more. Or it may inspire us to praise God for his goodness, thank him for his blessings, or to ask his forgiveness for not living according to his plan in this way.

Third, we can form our minds by participating in a Bible study or other small Faith formation group at our Parish we can attend presentations, Retreats, and conferences. We can also listen to good Catholic radio and podcast, read Catholic blogs, follow videos, and hear Catholic speakers but here we must be careful. We can certainly be enriched by listening to podcasts while driving, cooking, or folding laundry, or by viewing and occasional inspirational quote, short video, or link to a Blog article from someone's Social Media post. But we want to keep two things in mind when using new media even for good Catholic content: its power to distract us and its limitations and forming our minds well.

### **"Look down! Look down!"**

The Blockbuster film Musical *Les Miserables* opens with a dramatic scene: hundreds of French convicts pulling dozens of ropes to bring a massive ship into Harbor. Armed French soldiers walk up and down the rows of prisoners making sure not a single person slacks for a moment. Condemned this slave like labor as part of their punishment, the prisoners pull with all their might and avoid eye contact with the officers, sing to each other the musical's opening song, "Look down... Looks down!"

Today a similar form of slavery is emerging. But it's one we bring upon ourselves. Many people fill their days moving from one click to the next on their phones, checking messages, updates, emails, posts, and links. In between meetings. While waiting in line. When at the park with their kids. What does everyone do in these moments? They *look down* at their phones. They have no time to think. To sit in quiet. To plan their days. They move from one alert to the next, governed by their phones and not their minds.

Even devout Catholics are susceptible to this. On the outside, they may look very Catholic. They might go to mass, visit the chapel, and say some prayers at certain moments, but the rest of their days are filled with one media distraction after a. And just because the media they're consuming is often Catholic, that doesn't mean it's all good for their souls. The sheer amount of time one can spend with media and its power of distraction can inhibit our intellects, keeping our minds bouncing from one thing to the next, hindering us from concentrating well, thinking clearly, contemplating truth, and hearing the voice of God. No line people today have a little space interior for silence. Contemplation. Thought. Yet God speaks to us in silence; if we don't fight or silence in our lives, we will be slaves to the incessant, distracting, indeed demanding noise all around us. Instead of looking down at our phones throughout let's virtuously set parameters around when and how much we use them. Let's keep them more at Bay so we can live a fuller human life and *look up* to the higher things in life, whether it's creating space to

think about what's most important each day or literally looking up and gazing at the people in our lives. If we do, we'll find ourselves giving more of our attention to our actual children, spouses, friends, and God Dash and not just what Catholic media says *about* them.

### Reading a Good Book

No podcast, Radio Show, or Newsfeed can replace the impact of reading a good book. Again, good Catholic content delivered through modern media forms can certainly enriched our lives. I've personally been involved in helping produce a number for these kinds of programs, and I know people whose lives have been changed by what they've taken in from a podcast, a video, a TV show, or a recorded talk. But when it comes to the kind of Faith formation you need as a disciple who is not "conformed to this world" but is being "transformed by the renewal of [ your mind]," it's not enough. We need more than a show or a blog can offer, which is why the best of Catholic media Outlets don't see themselves as the ultimate solution, but when their audiences to the deeper sources that are able to *form our minds* with the wisdom of God.

Remember the quote from Archbishop Chaput earlier in this chapter: "we need to *read*" the Word of God and the great books. Through modern media, we can certainly have moments of learning some new information ("I never knew about that saint") or a deeper understanding of a certain truth ("that helps me understand this aspect of the faith I always had questions about") or being inspired in a certain ("I needed to hear that Dash this will help my prayer life!") And all that is great. But modern media shouldn't replace the formation we could receive from reading a good book yet whether that book is the Bible, the *Catechism*, a classic from the Catholic tradition, or a book from the great teachers of our day. After all, being filled with a lot of good information, even if it is Christian, does not make one whole week, and knowing a lot of different facts, even if they are Catholic facts, does not make one wise. As T. S. Eliot once wrote,

Where is the wisdom we have lost in  
knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in  
information?

If you find enrichment from the information found in good Catholic blogs, podcasts, YouTube videos, and radio shows, keep using them! Just make sure you are also feeding your mind with good books, classes, and other experiences that form your intellect with a clear, orderly presentation of the Faith. Good books, courses, and Faith formation programs can do much more to form one's mind than the show or blog can ever hope to accomplish.

Of course, if we want to be wise and have the truths of the Faith sink in, shape us, and indeed, become part of us, we need time to reflect. Important truths are like seeds in that they need time to take root in our minds. And when they take root, they help us see reality correctly and can serve to guide our lives. As St. Thomas Aquinas explains, " To understand, it is necessary that those things that a man hears become, as it were, connatural to him in order that they may be impressed perfectly on his mind. For this a man needs time in which his intellect may be confirmed and what it has received, by much meditation."

You may have had the experience of reading a paragraph from a good article or book that was so insightful that you put it down for a moment and took time to think about the point you out there was making. You pondered for a few moments its meaning and significance. If someone were to ask you later about what you were reading, you'd be able to say something thoughtful about it because you internalize the truth you encountered.

But you may also have had the experience of reading something quickly, superficially, on dash the dash go as he raced to the next thing. You remember liking what you read, but you would not be able to articulate one important point from the piece in a coherent way.

There are many things we come across in the media that do not require are meditating on that. For these, a quick glance, a superficial read, a passive listening to Something in the background is just fine. I don't need to contemplate, or example, the highlights of my favorite team's game, my friends post about his vacation, or the weather report I'm hearing on the radio. Even much content in Catholic media day interviews, shows, posts - don't require the minds full attention. We might consider them simply as wholesome entertainment, maybe even inspiring or motivation. But let's not confuse that with serious Faith formation. If we want the most important truths of our faith to take root in our soul, we need to take time to contemplate that. And a time for meditating on this truth is precisely what's missing in most of our media consumption.

Our phones, for example, are not built for such contemplation. They are intentionally designed to keep us moving rapidly from one click to the next. We might fill our minds with incessant scattered images, sounds, words, and messages on a screen, but even when we encounter a truth in a video article, show, or post, how often do we put the phone down and take time to contemplate - to Mullet over in our minds, try to understand it better, and ponder it's significance so it takes root in our souls?

And this leads to a final point: we need to be honest and ask ourselves how much of our media is, even when it's Catholic media, is more about entertainment and distraction than it is about real Faith formation. To help us discern Catholic media use, we should ask ourselves whether were using this media primarily to consume it - like a tasty piece of pizza - or to foster thoughtful on during of what's true in a way that leads us to an encounter with Jesus Christ, who is Truth. there's nothing wrong with eating a piece of pizza, but we should examine whether we're often turn into our phones or screens primarily to satisfy a craving (hoping just one more click will give us some psychological reward), to entertain ourselves, to fill a void because we don't like the silence and being alone with our own thoughts, or to create a feeling of stain "connected" because we fear missing out on what everyone else is doing.

From the beginning, there has been a battle for our minds. But don't think the battle is just about the kind of content you take in (Is it Catholic? Or is it R-rated material?). Today, the battle is also about the way you take it in. For the new kinds of media themselves - their power to distract, their lure in taking up so much of your time, their tendency to keep us at the superficial and train our minds to avoid deeper, serious thought - are intentionally designed in a way that keeps us from contemplation. We should seriously weigh the amount and manner in which we use the new media.