

# A Better Way to Live

Review by Ben Lima

It is easy to criticize what falls short of virtue; far harder it is to find examples of the genuinely true, good, and beautiful, and to do them justice. But that is just what Catholic historian Todd Hartch has done in his study of contemporary American cultural renewal. His book is addressed to an audience that, deprived of a culture that values the transcendentals, knows how to pray and worship, but is unsure of how to beautify the world.

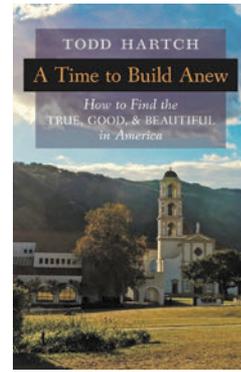
In seven chapters, Hartch considers both individual and institutional case studies, making detailed examination of the careers of a sculptor; a longtime mayor; an order of sisters and an order of friars; a humanities program; an architecture school; and a university. His findings offer reasons for hope in an age when mainstream institutions are at best indifferent, and at worst hostile, to the transcendentals. Though his primary frame of reference is Catholic, he writes appreciatively of the American DNA of religiously inspired renewal, from the colonial Puritans and Quakers onward.

In different ways, each of Hartch's subjects has been able to put aside distractions and to cultivate what is good. Inspired by Aristotle, the Integrated Humanities Program at the University of Kansas used stargazing (followed by the memorization and recitation of poetry) to gently introduce deracinated, culturally impoverished American teenagers to the "primary experience of reality," or "poetic knowledge" — to delight in the wonder and splendor of being, which inspires love. In contrast to the impersonal American "multiversity" culture, the Franciscan University of Steubenville offers college students a thoroughly personal and familial educational community, grounded in Franciscan humility, which equips graduates for the work of evangelization. The Dominican friars achieve the rare combination of "rev-

erent liturgy, vibrant orthodoxy and life of intellectual achievement," constructively engaging via their Thomistic Institute with the full range of modern secular intellectual culture.

Hartch emphasizes how his subjects' very fidelity to tradition enables their creative achievements, citing G.K. Chesterton on the "adventure" of orthodoxy. The goal of formation in the classical transcendentals is absolutely *not* the mindless repetition of past models. Instead, such formation is simply the precondition of an adequately creative response to new conditions. For example, the Dominicans can respond intelligently to new questions *because of* their formation in the Thomist tradition. Trained in the classical tradition, graduates of the Notre Dame School of Architecture can design beautiful *new* buildings that respect their sites and complement their neighbors.

Still less do the transcendentals entail an absolute attachment to the past, over against the present. During his ten terms as mayor of Charleston (from 1975 to 2016), Joe Riley both worked to preserve and repair its price-



## A Time to Build Anew

How to Find the True, Good, and Beautiful in America

By Todd Hartch  
Angelico Press,  
pp. 234, \$26

less, beautiful historic urban fabric, and stood firmly with the African-American community to work for racial justice and rectify the legacy of historic injustice. At the end of Riley's administration, *Conde Nast Traveler* named Charleston the top U.S. tourist destination for eight consecutive years.

The most emotionally moving chapter profiles the Sisters of Life, whose ministry is to love and serve women who are considering abortion, primarily by offering them a place of "security and stability" during their pregnancy. Unsurprisingly, the sisters' self-giving love bears better fruit than any number of heated debates on the topic. Hartch quotes one non-religious former client of the sisters, "Jane," who stayed at their convent during her pregnancy and who marveled at their relentless kindness, so unlike her previous experience with communal living

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in a women's dorm during college.

Guests such as Jane also see a model for loving, self-giving male-female relations, in the form of the team of male volunteers who help support the sisters in their work by fixing appliances, moving furniture, and other tasks. Despite working amid the most painful of human situations, the sisters relentlessly share love and joy with their clients. This whole way of life is founded on prayer: the sisters pray for four and a half hours every day. (Another of Hartch's subjects, Michael Scanlan, visionary president of Steubenville, also spends three or four hours each morning in prayer.)

For each of his subjects, but perhaps especially for the sisters, Hartch emphasizes how the truth and goodness of their work "shines forth" in the form of beauty. In his conclusion, citing James Matthew Wilson's *Vision of the Soul*, he explains how beauty, "the splendor of all the transcendentals ... comes first and also last in our experience." Beauty is what initially draws us into the good and then, "after contemplation, becomes in the end both more real and more intense."

While praising his subjects' accomplishments, Hartch is unafraid to offer criticism. He shows how the charismatic leadership of the Kansas project attracted understandable concern from observers worried about appropriate boundaries between faculty and students. He argues that for sculptor Frederick Hart, isolation by the modernist establishment kept him from full participation in a living intellectual and artistic tradition, and led to certain weaknesses, such as a "puerile Teilhardian theology." He laments that Providence College, founded by the Dominicans in 1917, appears to be losing its distinctiveness, absorbed into the broader therapeutic-bureaucratic culture of American academia.

Hartch also frankly acknowledges that commitment to the transcendentals may come at the cost of worldly success. The Kansas project was ultimately dissolved by hostile administrators. Hart's sculpture was alternately ignored and derided by mainstream critics who were blind to the virtues of his work.

However, Hartch keeps his focus on what can realistically be achieved, despite difficult obstacles. All his case studies offer much to learn from. Criticizing the false, the bad, and the ugly can easily be more than a full-time job for anyone who wants it, but to do so risks running afoul of the numerous warnings against anger and wrath in Proverbs and the Epistles. Hartch

## An Act of Worship That Invites

Review by Walker Robinson

Choral Evensong emerged out of the monastic tradition and was made particularly Anglican both through the poetic prose of Cranmer and Coverdale, as well as through the English choral tradition from Tallis to Howells. It is considered by many an anomaly in the hustle and bustle of the 21st-century Anglophone world.

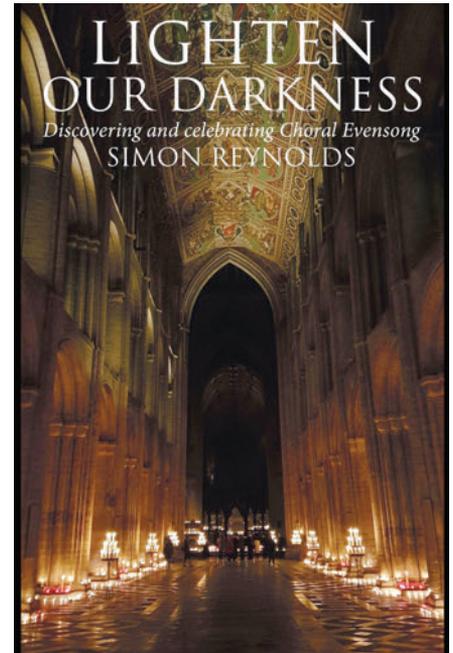
*Lighten Our Darkness* by Simon Reynolds suggests many reasons why Choral Evensong, especially in the cathedrals and large parish churches of the Anglican Communion, has thrived despite declining church membership and the secularization of our culture. Reynolds, an Anglican priest, academic, and former succentor at St. Paul's Cathedral, London, seeks in this small volume to explain the appeal of Choral Evensong to its audience, to trace the historic emergence of Choral Evensong out of its early Christian and monastic roots, and finally (in the bulk of this book) to walk novices through and to reflect upon the liturgical structure of a Choral Evensong service.

Each portion of the Evensong liturgy (the Preces and Responses, Psalms, Readings, Canticles, Prayers, and the Anthem) is given an individual chapter situating it within the history of Christian liturgy and highlighting its distinctive Anglican formulation in the mid-17th century with the publication of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Closing each chapter are "Words of Reflection," by writers as varied as John Calvin, Siegfried Sassoon, and Rowan Williams, centered on Reynolds's topic.

Why are contemporary worshipers (and, perhaps more intriguingly,

shows a much better way: how real successes, however few in number and overlooked by the broader culture, can light the way for generations to come.

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### Lighten Our Darkness

Discovering and Celebrating

Choral Evensong

By Simon Reynolds

Darton, Longman, and Todd, pp. 128, \$22.99

tourists) drawn to this centuries-old service full of occasionally stilted Elizabethan language? Reynolds is at his best when grappling with this question. Central to this appeal is the anonymity allowed to worshipers as participants in Choral Evensong, as well as the provision of a space of stillness and silence separated from the pace and pressure of contemporary life.

Challenging arguments for the inherent narcissism of contemporary Western European (and American) culture, Reynolds posits that Choral Evensong is appealing explicitly in its ability to take us out of ourselves and to challenge our self-referential tendencies.