



AGELESS CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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"Strong gongs groaning as the guns
boom far,
Don John of Austria is going to the
war!"

Again and again, marching forwards and back, the swell of battle rising in my chest with every recitation. I strode as high as Don John "stirring in his stirrups like the thrones of all the world". Every step became a step of courage as the canons boomed about; I could see the slaves in the Muslim gallies, where "he finds his God forgotten and seeks no more a sign". In all the battle I could see my own battle with sin: my lustfulness, my doubt. In the dark prisons of the rowers, I could smell my own corruption. In the faces of those "Christian captives, sick and sunless", I could see my own face. Jason Evert had given my mind the reasons, but "Lepanto" had shown my heart the truth. Other things had also moved my heart, but none so completely as Chesterton's great poem. Good words move the mind, great words move the whole person.

I did not limit that poem's life within me to

one summer. At a later time, during a camp-out, around a bonfire in the throes of midnight, I recited before my friends what I had recited at family dinner just a year before. We all sat about the flames in lawn furniture and in folding chairs, keeping each other awake with the blood curdling speculations around historical mysteries like the Dyatlov Pass Incident. Desiring to end the spooky discussion and to go to bed, I asked whether any of them had ever heard "Lepanto" by G. K. Chesterton. The answer was in the negative. I stood up out of my chair before eight or nine young men of varying backgrounds and personalities, gave a simple historical run-down of the events described in the poem, and then, below the vastness of night, with the stars and the fire to guide me, I led them into the chopping waves and splintering wood of the battle of Lepanto. The recitation lasted eight, maybe ten minutes. The boys were silent to the end, either out of respect or of tiredness, I cared not. They had heard it either way: none fell asleep. When victory came to Don Juan and the Turks fell at the edge of his sword, when his soldiers looked on with pride as he

returned home victorious, and the poem ended, I sat down very satisfied. You could even have described me as jolly. I felt I had all the courage I needed. I had drunk fully of the cup of life and completely accepted my portion. It is a feeling that has occurred several times to me around poetry. This is one story, there are several of its kind, and it is humbling to recall that it all began quite simply with a mother who sang her babies to sleep. A mother who shared all she loved of poetry with them as they got older, and who gave them a loving kiss as they got older still and left her, as all children must, bound for uncharted waters, armed with faith, reason, and grit enough to face all the fiercest battles in the world. Poetry is not the end; it is the means to the end. Poetry is the flourishing, the fountain, and the very beginning of life, and it is a shame that it sits through so many lives untouched.

G. K. Martin is a rising sophomore at the Franciscan University of Steubenville, a Squire in the Society of G. K. Chesterton, and a proponent of western culture and a wearer of cowboy boots.

Ageless Children's Literature



Paul T. Mascia

Beauty and Suffering:

WHY I WROTE NAZAR'S JOURNEY

Paul T. Mascia's newly published novel, Nazar's Journey, is set in terror-torn Iraq in 2014. It's about a boy, not yet fourteen years old, who is caught in the midst of the Islamic State's ethnic cleansing of Christians. The editor of the StAR invited Mr. Mascia to explain his motivation for writing the novel.

The inspirational roots of *Nazar's Journey* stretch back almost fifty years. During my senior year at Yale, which was in 1975, I took a psychology class on child development. The professor gave us the option of writing a routine class paper or writing a children's story. I chose to write a children's story. I

remembered C. S. Lewis' comments that it is okay to include bad things in a children's tale if you provide a resolution to the evil at the end. So, I experimented by creating a story about an injured boy who had lost his father during the Vietnam war and was searching for him. The narrative had a bird, but the bird was not the Skylark of *Nazar's Journey*. The boy was much younger than Nazar. A friend volunteered to do some illustrations for me. I rushed to complete the story as graduation was rapidly approaching, so my research was very limited. Still, my professor liked the story, and she suggested I get it published.

The important detail that pertains to *Nazar's Journey* is that the Vietnam story had theological content, as I was really writing about redemption, reflecting in story form my personal experience of the intimate love of God the Father. The wounded boy was symbolic of the brokenness of the human condition without God. The search of the boy for his father represented the search within each soul for the love and mercy of God the Father, and the emptiness of life without His love. The bird symbolized, in this early story, the reality that God knows every detail of our lives, that even if we do not feel His presence, even when suffering

is overwhelming, He accompanies us on our journey. Those elements from a story created fifty years ago, in an entirely different historical and cultural setting, found their way into my current novella.

Here's another key point related to why I wrote *Nazar's Journey*. When Benedict XVI became pope, my wife and I enjoyed reading his homilies, essays and his extensive interviews, such as *Salt of the Earth* and *Light of the World*. There is one essay which particularly made an impact on me. He wrote about how people are most often converted by two factors: the witness of the lives of the saints . . . and by beauty. I reflected seriously on these words. I wasn't sure how much of a saint I would turn out to be, although no harm trying. But I was convinced I could contribute to the second goal. I felt I could create beauty which would draw others to Christ, as a writer, and that the opportunity was wide open before me as I was transitioning to semi-retirement. I felt that if my work was executed well, I might be able to encourage other artists to be part of this "beauty movement"—by means of beauty, to foster the "new evangelization". I hoped that *Nazar's Journey* might become a mustard seed in this movement.

The third motivating factor was the desire to call attention to the reality of the persecution and displacement of our fellow Christians in other countries. During most of my adult life, I had so much exposure in

the news to the two Iraq wars and the ISIS catastrophe. In more recent years, there was extensive discussion about religious liberty in the *National Catholic Register* and the *Columbia* magazine. Then I remembered a TV interview with Father Ben Kiely talking about how ISIS would paint the letter N (for Nazarene) on the doors of houses in Iraq so that Christians could be singled out and targeted, either by killing them, or harming them personally or financially. The Holy Spirit was speaking to me of the urgency of making known, to those of us in the west, the sufferings of our brothers and sisters in Christ, who may be thousands of miles away—to personalize their sufferings and make them more real. We are, in fact, all members of the Body of Christ, but in our parish prayer, and in our western consciousness, the ordeals of these persecuted Christians are far away and forgotten. So *Nazar's Journey* became, for me, a way to personalize these sufferings and to encourage the reader towards specific responses of prayer, compassion and charity.

My fourth and final motivating factor, at this stage of my life, is that I desired to give something back to the Lord in thanksgiving for the many blessings he has given me, particularly the discovery of His personal love for me, for the gifts of my wife and family, for our children and grandchildren and the wonderful friendships we have shared over the years. Psalm 116 asks the question, "What return shall I make to the Lord, for

all the good He has done for me?" *Nazar's Journey* is my special way of answering this question.

As a final reflection, I would like to comment on one detail in the scene when Nazar enters the church of Mar Addai in Karem-lesh. He observes in horror the extensive desecration, and notices that the two words "beloved Son" on the sanctuary wall (from "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" in the gospel of Matthew)—had been beaten by a hammer and spray painted with black ink by the ISIS warriors. Although the other details of the church desecration in my book are accurate, this is a fictional detail. What I am suggesting here is that there are many powerful and evil forces at work in our world which seek to distract us, to pull us away from the magnificent discovery that we are sons and daughters of God. The Father loves each one of us profoundly and inexplicably. His Son has paid the price with His suffering, death, and resurrection to impart to us this great treasure of the Father's love, the very heart of the good news. If *Nazar's Journey* awakens one reader even to begin to be curious that such wondrous love could ever be a possibility in his or her own life, then the mustard seed has been planted, and, for me, the book is a success.

Paul T. Mascia's novella, Nazar's Journey, is newly published by Austin Macauley Publishers.

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK!

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