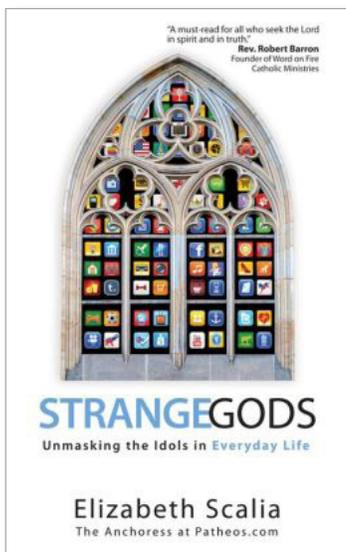


BOOKS FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

BY TIMOTHY P. O'MALLEY AND JESSICA KEATING



Strange Gods: Unmasking the Idols in Everyday Life by Elizabeth Scalia

Notre Dame, IN:
Ave Maria Press, 2013.

Idolatry, though no longer practiced as the adoration of a golden calf *per se*, is a persistent temptation in the Christian life. Elizabeth Scalia's (a.k.a. "The

Anchroress") *Strange Gods* provides an astute account of how such idolatry can poison the Christian imagination. She writes:

We dismiss the golden calf story and its lessons at our peril. It's true that we are no longer literally flinging our precious metals into a crucible and buffing up stolid beasts of burden to worship...Our present-day idols are much less obvious...Idols begin with ideas. From there, we shape them in the psyche, grow them in the ego, and then engage with them intimately, throughout our lives, in our families, our culture, our entertainments, and our political discourse. We create idols out of our norms of behavior, our material

possessions, and social status. We even create them out of our faith (10).

In the successive pages of this modern day *City of God*, Scalia examines the various forms of idolatry that distort humanity's relationship with the Triune God. Self-adoration, the worshipping of ideas, the praising of wealth as the key to human flourishing, the idolatry of technological innovation, of human plans, of sexuality and language—all of these idols receive masterful examination under the instrument of Scalia's diagnostic prose. It is essential to note that Scalia is not performing a mere bludgeoning of culture, prominent enough in those who write religious blogs today. Rather, her book is an occasion to offer healing from those idols that

distract the human person from the fullness of divine life in Christ. She does not blame some boogey-man of modernity but instead implicates her own self, the weakness of her own will, in such idolatry. Theological thinkers appear alongside the examination of her own experience as blogger, mother, as parishioner, as participant in an increasingly stratified political order.

There are some areas in which one could offer some diagnostic disagreement with Scalia. Her account of human sexuality, for example, perceives the ubiquitous nature of sex in modern life as related to coolness: “Because so much of being cool means having sex, we find ourselves condoning all manners of sexual activity and demonstrating complete open-mindedness by recognizing sex as a mostly wholesome recreational activity” (82). The creation of an idol out of human sexuality may, for some, be related to “coolness,” to a desire to avoid a charge of prudishness. But, the desire for sex (especially among emerging adults) is not simply an opportunity to exercise fashionableness in life. Among emerging adults, sex is often a way of escaping from sorrow, from the worries of contemporary life, an expression of a love that we long for but refuse to think possible. A closer reading of sociological

literature around some of these themes would have broadened Scalia’s diagnoses of certain idols.

That being said, Scalia’s text is a delight to read, inviting a process of self-examination that will undoubtedly be healing for the entire life of the Church and polis alike. I especially recommend this book for parish reading groups, for Advent and Lenten meditation, and for those offices of evangelization seeking a critical but hospitable approach to engaging culture. The book will set one upon a journey in which, with Scalia, we learn that “[w]e will never live an idol-free life while we live in *corporale*, but we can at least be aware of our common tendency to create them unintentionally. We can recognize the havoc everyday idolatry can play in our personal lives and our spiritual lives if we do not constantly try to knock the idols aside, before they stand too completely in the way of God’s constant and consoling love. He aches for us with a longing that our own yearnings for him cannot begin to approach” (162). Only through this lesson will our idols be smashed against the rock of God’s own love.

