



Study Guide

Living Wisely with the Church Fathers

Chapter 7: “Let the Races Begin!”

By Chris Hall

Isn't it fair to say that North American culture is entertainment saturated? And what entertains us? Sports, film, social media, television, various websites, and so on. Apart from the time we spend at work, it is surely possible for an image-bearer to spend every other waking moment in front of a screen, watching various images and listening to countless sounds and words for hour after hour. We can entertain ourselves to death (Neil Postman). And sadly, I think, this is exactly what is happening.

Not only are we listening to and watching lots of stuff, but the content of our entertainment is becoming increasingly coarse. I think back to 1969, the year “Midnight Cowboy” was released. The film received an “X” rating, largely because of its sexually explicit themes and images. I saw the film when I was 19. Now let's fast-forward to 2018. In comparison to *many* films produced today, one must say that “Midnight Cowboy” is tame. Yes, it still has an “R” rating, but is far removed from what is commonly accepted today, both in terms of language and theme. Indeed, its central theme promotes the love shown between its two main characters (played by Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman).

I bring up this comparison between 1969 and 2018 to illustrate the progressive coarsening of American culture, the slide into darkness that marks our time. What we're experiencing is “the frog in hot water” effect. Supposedly, if you place a frog in warm water and slowly increase the water's temperature, the frog will never notice that its environment is heating up. Finally, you have a boiled frog.

Similarly, our culture's entertainment values are increasingly coarse and overheated. Violence and sex sells. What was once considered unacceptable, is now promoted and welcomed. We have experienced a huge cultural shift in values, one that I believe will only continue.

How like the Roman culture the church fathers inhabited! Consider some of its characteristics I mention in this chapter:

- Do you remember the common Roman graffito that began the chapter? “Baths, wine and love-making destroy our bodies, yet love-making, wine and baths make life worth living.” Ponder the value-system embedded in this graffito.
- Recall Cyprian's comments on the violence of the Roman games: those who attend the games in the arena are “a multitude sadder than any solitude. A gladiatorial combat is being prepared that blood may delight the lust of cruel eyes.” (p. 196) *Cruel eyes*. That's quite a phrase. What would cruel eyes be watching in our modern context? It's staggering to realize that if one desires to do so, we can now watch people being executed on YouTube for hours on end. Real violence for “cruel eyes.”



- What we watch does affect how we think and perceive the world. Hours spent before a screen affect the brain's ability to process information and in turn how we respond to our environment. If so – and modern studies are piling up evidence – Cyprian's words hit home: "Adultery is learned as it is seen. How great a collapse of morals, what a stimulus to base deeds, what a nourishing of vices, to be polluted by the gestures of actors. ... Ask now whether he who looks upon this can be healthy minded or chaste." *We can have a healthy, chaste mind or its opposite.* So much depends on the choices we make. Vices can be nourished, but so can virtues.

Take a good look at pages 199-205 and especially note the church fathers' concerns about Roman entertainment. Then transfer your attention to our modern setting. How might this exercise in cultural comparison help us form more wisely our "yeses" and "nos" concerning our entertainment choices?

Let's turn our attention to my words on p. 210: "We, like our ancient Christian relatives, must carefully and prayerfully ask how we should respond to the entertainment possibilities offered to us early in the twenty-first century. Outright rejection? Enthusiastic embrace? Are there books or films that should be considered off limits? What should one listen to? What should one avoid for the sake of spiritual health and obedience to Jesus? Which films harm us? *And which expand our ability to love?* (emphasis added) Can one be a well-educated, deeply loving Christian while simultaneously living in a Christian ghetto, unfamiliar with entertainment trends that often truthfully reflect on noteworthy social, historical, literary, and political issues and concerns? How are our entertainments shaping us? Sensitizing us or jading us, nourishing us or poisoning us? Are they increasing our ability to love or creating dead zones in our soul?"

These series of questions point to a larger issue and challenge, one I explore in the last chapter of *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers*. How can we increasingly live a good life with God? What advice do the church fathers offer?