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Poverty in America; Catholicism?s ins and outs

Diane Scharper | May. 25, 2013

FIRE IN THE ASHES: TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AMONG THE POOREST CHILDREN IN AMERICA
By Jonathan Kozol
Published by Crown Publishers, $27

What happens to the children of poor, uneducated parents who grow up in crime-ridden ghettos and attend segregated, underperforming schools? National Book Award winner Jonathan Kozol spent 50 years seeking answers to that question. He has presented his findings in 13 books from his earliest, *Death at an Early Age* (1967), to his latest, *Fire in the Ashes*, which offers a searing indictment of programs supposedly designed to help the poor.

Kozol began his career as an activist for children?s education after being fired from his job in the Boston public schools for teaching fourth-graders poems by Langston Hughes (?a curriculum deviation?). As one might expect, he has little good to say about educational bureaucracy and most schools -- especially those in poor districts.

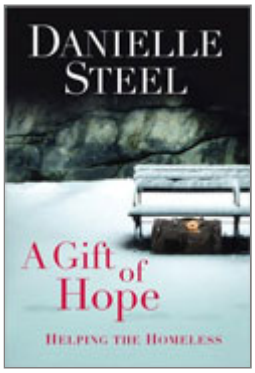
Fire in the Ashes focuses on children Kozol profiled in his earlier works, primarily *Rachel and Her Children* (1988) and *Amazing Grace* (1995). These are Latino and black children who grew up in the Hotel Martinique, a homeless shelter and drug haven in the South Bronx in New York. Mostly, they come from families with a single mom who bears sole responsibility for her children?s welfare.

Kozol paints a grim picture of these children?s growing-up years: from their ill-health brought on by contact with pollutants; to their homes, which in some cases lacked basic necessities like water and heat; to their subpar schools with few textbooks and overcrowded classes taught by inexperienced and underpaid teachers. The statistics are dismal. For example, out of 1,000 ninth-graders, only 65 went on to graduate from high school.

Now, the children are in their mid-30s. Some sold drugs and became addicts. Several went to jail. Some have died, including some who were so depressed that they committed suicide.

Only a few succeeded. Graduating from college, they entered careers in which they hoped to help those who

like themselves had been left behind. These are, as noted in the title of this disturbing book, the small fires still burning in the ashes.



A GIFT OF HOPE: HELPING THE HOMELESS

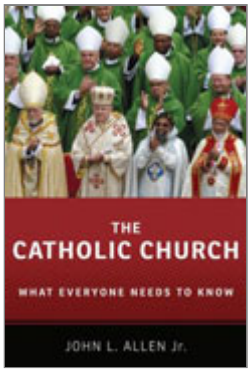
By Danielle Steel
Published by Delacorte Press, $20

After her son committed suicide and her marriage disintegrated, Danielle Steel prayed for strength to carry on, if only for the sake of her eight other children. One day, as if in answer to her prayers, Steel (a best-selling romance novelist) heard an inner voice directing her to help the homeless. Taking as her inspiration her son?s concern for the poor, her own religious aspirations and her sense of mission, she brought clothing, shoes and bedding to those who lived on the streets of San Francisco.

A Gift of Hope is a record of her efforts. Both memoir and reflection on homelessness, the book offers sketches of a few homeless people, like the young woman who suffered from cancer but was afraid to go to a shelter because of the prevalence of rape and robbery in such places.

Steel also briefly shares her frustrations with ineffectual government agencies and outdated methods of handling mental illness, which, she says, is the cause of nearly all cases of homelessness among adults.

For nearly 12 years, Steel took monthly sorties into neighborhoods where the homeless lived in alleys, doorways and under bridges, using cardboard boxes and other makeshift dwellings for protection from the elements as well as the predators. Although the book would benefit from more details about the subject and fewer comments about the author?s emotional state, it should prick the conscience of even the most obtuse reader.



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW

By John L. Allen Jr.
Published by Oxford University Press, $16.95

If you?re thinking that John Allen?s latest offering, *The Catholic Church: What Everyone Needs to Know*, is a

typical book of Catholic apologetics, you?re wrong. This book isn?t typical. Nor is it a defense of the church. But it is Catholic.

Although Allen focuses on the church in the present, he also looks at Catholicism?s past. His subjects include nearly everything you wanted to know (and didn?t want to know) about the church, including the difference between bishops and priests, the pope as an absolute ruler, and types of nuns. He covers theology, worship, politics, scandals, money and the future as he makes all issues relevant to today?s hot-button concerns. And he does so with a smile.

His engaging style blends colloquialisms with formal language, making the book feel like a conversation between friends. He uses a conversational Q-and-A format -- as in: ?You mentioned the Second Vatican Council. What?s a council?? -- all of which makes the book entertaining, even if some of the topics it discusses are not of universal interest. Besides his own talent for the bon mot, Allen sprinkles his prose with bits of others? wisdom, often from liberals like Maureen Dowd, who, for example, observed, ?The bishops and the Vatican care passionately about putting women in chastity belts. Yet they let unchaste priests run wild.?

A senior correspondent for *NCR* and senior Vatican analyst for CNN, Allen knows how to write. He shines facts and figures until they sparkle with wit. When the subject threatens to get heavy, as in a discussion of the language used at Mass, Allen offers gems such as ?Catholicism is a bit like the McDonald?s of organized religions,? although, as he says, one doesn?t want to push the analogy too far. Ultimately, Allen manages to write a serious book that doesn?t take itself seriously.

[Diane Scharper is the author and editor of several books, including *Reading Lips and Other Ways to Overcome a Disability*.]

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