

# A Message from Denver

All of us learned as children the simple but profound words that Abraham Lincoln spoke at Gettysburg. He reminded his listeners that our forefathers had created “a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

And much of what he said on that November day in 1863 is particularly meaningful in this September of 1993: For today we are again “engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.”

Today’s struggle is at least as dangerous as a war of shot and shell. It is a war of ideas and values. It is a clash of two cultures. And it will certainly decide whether the nation, as created by our forefathers, will survive.

On the one side are those who hold with the traditional values of Western civilization and with the transcendental efficacy of revealed moral truths. On the other side are the secular humanists – the moral nihilists – who deny the validity of any objective standards of good and evil.

On the one side are those who agree with Washington that “It is impossible to govern rightly without God”- who agree with Jefferson that the liberties of a people – their inalienable rights – are the gifts of a divine Providence. On the other side are the counter culturists who insist that separation of church and state means separation of God and state.

On the one side are those who, like the prescient commentator Alex de Toqueville, foresee the destruction of a democracy that abandons its moral moorings. On the other side are the fiery evangelists of the Age of Aquarius, who would have us “do our thing” – whatever it might be.

They tell us that Judea-Christian precepts of conduct are irrelevant, that family values are anachronistic, that everyone is entitled to establish his or her own moral code.

The views of those who would preserve Western civilization were personified and celebrated last month in Denver by the outpouring of affection and support for the message of His Holiness, Pope John Paul.

The views of secular humanism – that spread like drug-induced hallucinations during the 1960's- were personified and celebrated by the pitiful self-abuse and the spiritual squalor of the spectacle known as Woodstock. From Woodstock to Denver the cultural conflict has raged. It is appropriate – it is essential – that we ask ourselves: How goes that battle? How, we may ask first do the mores of today compare with those of earlier decades? Have we become safer? More stable? Brighter?

William Bennett, the former Secretary of Education, provided some answers when he noted recently that since 1960 – approximately one generation – there has been:

- an almost 600 percent increase in violent crime in the United States;
- an increase of more than 200 percent in teenage suicides;
- a quadrupling of the divorce rate;
- and our public education system, preoccupied with political correctness and remote social goals, has become an international scandal with a drop of 80 points in the SAT scores of its best students.

Next we may well ask: Are all Americans deemed equal today – including, for example, Catholics? We all remember the conduct at Holy Cross Cathedral by a rowdy organization that subjected newly ordained priests and their families to verbal and physical abuse. We recall an invasion during a Mass at St.

Patrick's Cathedral with members of the same organization screaming "bigot" and "murderer" at Cardinal O'Connor and spitting the Communion wafer on the floor.

What of the action of assistant attorneys general in Massachusetts who sought injunctions to prevent priests who had been arrested for protesting abortion from wearing their clerical garb in court? Have you ever heard of a similar effort directed against clergymen of other faiths?

The apparent license for Catholic bashing, however crude and offensive, leads us to ask: Do we still have a free press, or has it largely become the captive and servant of the counter culture? There is no suggestion here that the media are participants in a secret combination dedicated to promoting secular humanism at the expense of truth.

The explanation of media conduct, I submit, is simply that journalists – despite a posture of intellectual sophistication – tend to share a conditioned gullibility. The attitudes of journalists concerning religion have been researched. A glance at those attitudes would cause one to ask: Is it any wonder that the seeds of secular humanism flourish in such fallow ground?

It helps us understand, for example, why the *Boston Globe* in its report of the disorder at Holy Cross Cathedral did not tell its readers of the obscene parody of the Communion rite in which condoms were substituted for the host ... It did not tell that the Sermon on the Mount was mocked as an endorsement of sodomy ... It did not report the assaults or the simulated sex acts. Instead it described the event as a "colorful, loud and peaceful" demonstration.

The outrage at St. Patrick's Cathedral was celebrated in the film called "Stop the Church" which was aired by many public broadcasting stations from New York to Los Angeles.

A catalog for a painting exhibit financed by the National

Endowment for the Arts described St. Patrick's as "that house of walking swastikas on Fifth Avenue." It referred to Cardinal O'Connor as a "fat cannibal" and a "creep in black skirts." The *New York Times* defended that as mere "critical opinion."

A week ago the press reported that Viacom had just completed an eight-billion dollar transaction that would make it the fifth largest media conglomerate in the world ... There was no mention of the fact that a TV station owned by Viacom in St. Louis recently hired a male prostitute and set him up in a luxury hotel suite... His assignment was to seek encounters with priests and identify any who might be interested in his services ... The room was wired for sound and there were taping facilities. The scheme was exposed, but the mere fact of its existence is evidential of the media's savagery toward the Church.

Personalities on a talk show on radio station WLUP-AM in Chicago suggested the Church should substitute slices of sausage for the Host and serve a "spicy body of Christ." They also proposed blackening the wafer and calling it "Cajun Jesus."

What would have been the reaction of the media if such acts and abuse had been directed against the religious leaders and places of worship of Baptists or Episcopalians or Jews or Muslims or the orthodox Greek Church? There would – and quite properly – have been a storm of protest. But where Catholics are concerned the reaction is, in substance, that we are getting what we deserve. . because our clergy persist in commenting on morality.

Certainly Catholics are not alone in defense of objective standards. Devout members of other faiths are keepers of that flame. But the media are generally wary of frontal assaults on groups that have shown a propensity to fight back. Lay Catholics tend to remain incomprehensibly silent, which encourages the boldness of our detractors.

Thus:

- *Boston Globe* columnist Ellen Goodman writes that it is “the Catholic hierarchy” that has “opened the can of worms marked religion.”
- The *Boston Globe* deplores the fact that the Catholic Church urges Christians to boycott films that blaspheme Christ and the Mother of Jesus. The *Globe* proclaims, at least with respect to Catholics, that the First Amendment protects freedom to blaspheme apparently in preference to freedom of worship.
- *The Philadelphia Inquirer* issues a grim warning to Catholic Bishops who speak out against the thousands of daily abortions in our country. According to the *Inquirer* they risk “reawakening all the old religious fears and prejudices that once inflamed American politics” by “giving them substance” . . . in other words, by proving them to be well-founded!

Catholics are admonished to silence their opposition to sexual promiscuity – even though more Americans are dying of ordinary venereal diseases than from AIDS.

We are told to stop being “up tight” about sex education for third graders, the latter being a particular pet project of the new Surgeon General, Joycelyn Elders, a practiced Catholic basher. Dr. Elders, speaking of our children, has said: “We taught them what to do in the front seat. Now it’s time to teach them what to do in the back seat.” And the message is that we had best get with that program.

The undeniable fact that parochial schools have spectacularly out-performed public schools is treated as a fault rather than a virtue. Jack Grier, a leader of the public school teachers lobby in Pennsylvania, speaking in opposition to school choice, proclaimed: “If the Catholic Church were to cease to exist and disappear today, it would be better for all of us.”

The illustrations are endless – sad, shoddy, at times scatological, not infrequently sinister. The teachings of our Church are ridiculed in every form of communication ... in newspapers ... on radio and television ... and from magazines, motion pictures and stage shows – on and off Broadway – to the costumes worn by the woman who calls herself Madonna.

There is no point in continuing the litany. I think the point is made.

And certainly there is nothing new about Catholic bashing. It runs like an ugly stain through the fabric of our history. But in the past it was aimed at closing Catholic Churches and burning down nunneries. That is not the case now .

What is new – what is particularly sinister – about current anti-Catholic bigotry is that it is stunningly different today in both substance and purpose. It is no longer aimed at coercing Catholics to abandon their Church – the purpose now is to force the Church to abandon Catholicism.

The Church is told it must change its doctrine on abortion. It must relax its teachings on sexual behavior. It must redefine its concepts of sin. It must restructure its clergy. It must even make substantive changes in its prayers.

Above all, we are told, Pope John Paul must stop repeating the millennia-old teachings of the Church and must reshape them to appeal to alleged demographics – like the script of a television soap opera. But even the silence that the secular humanists and their allies would impose on Catholics is selective:

Note that those who describe themselves as Catholics – but who look to manipulated opinion polls or noisy activists for their position on faith and morals – are quoted prominently and with respect.

Note that the media – including specifically the *Boston Globe*

– actually welcome the statements of our Bishops when they are supportive of the views of the media ... such as when they oppose the death penalty or call for a nuclear freeze or criticize certain economic programs.

Only when our Bishops criticize secular humanism, only when they dare trespass into sacrosanct precincts such as abortion or socially engineered education, are they told to stop trying to impose their views on society.

To support this assault on the fundamentals of Catholic faith, the media exploit the myth of Catholic rebellion. Never was this fantasy more garishly proclaimed than in the fortnight preceding the Pope's arrival in Denver: The media reported that American Catholics were rising against their Church. They were rejecting its authority. They considered the Pope hopelessly out of touch with the real world. The campaign was even given a name – "Days of Dissent."- The fiction was based on manipulated polls where the shape of the question evoked answers that could be, and were, used to distort.

It was based on renegade priests and so-called escaped nuns who were trotted out by the media to bear false witness to the alleged schism.

It was based on the testimony of so-called dissidents such as Frances Kissling, President of something called Catholics for a Free Choice. She has since admitted – under questioning – that she is the only member of her organization. But that was after she had been presented as the voice for a substantial flock of disenchanted Catholics.

It has also been revealed that the fraudulent front – "Catholics for a Free Choice" – is financed by the likes of Hugh Hefner, publisher of Playboy, and such organizations as Planned Parenthood and the contraceptive industry.

In the week prior to the Pope's arrival a sparse collection of publicity seekers – perhaps 100 in all – appeared in Denver.

They were identified as the vanguard of aroused Catholics who were headed in huge numbers for that mile-high city to turn the occasion into the "Days of Dissent." There were some interesting views expressed:

One speaker told the cameras she belonged to a group of Catholic women who worshipped nature and pagan gods as well as the Church's more conventional objects of veneration.

One man said he loved the Church – loved its music, candles and stained-glass windows – and that it was only its dogma that he rejected.

The media, giving respectful prominence to such views, predicted the Pope would arrive with messages of compromise in the position of the Church to placate the battalions of irate American Catholics converging on Denver.

But we know that rebel army never appeared. Instead, the handful of self-styled dissidents simply vanished. We saw them replaced by hundreds of thousands of devout Catholics, most of whom were teenagers who had driven, flown and even hitchhiked . . . to see and hear their Pope – to express their love for him and their fealty to his message.

The *Denver Post*, which had joined in the "Days of Dissent" forecast, estimated, in an apparent state of shock, that the faithful outnumbered dissidents 4000 to one. But when it assigned a reporter to collect critical quotes from the young people in attendance, he reported he had been unable to find even that one.

Who among us can ever forget that visitation of Pope John Paul? From the moment he arrived at the airport – when he stood in the rain, and urged everyone to choose life and aspire to morality – it was evident to the stunned media that he was undaunted. The immediate reaction of the press was, at least implicitly, to rebuke him for not moderating his remarks to avoid embarrassing any of the political figures who were on



hand for the photo opportunity.

But that was the dying whimper of the “Days of Dissent” nonsense. That myth was totally exposed by the adoring half-million who attended his Mass and the estimated three billion who watched it on television around the world.

His powerful presence and his reaffirmation of the teachings of the Church brought joy to American Catholics, but did not really surprise any of us.

Mighty empires, those of Rome, of the Nazis, of the Soviets – with all their power, all their instruments of torture and coercion – had sought desperately to crush that faith . . . and had failed. They are gone. All of them are gone. But the faith remains, powerful and strong as truth itself.

Which brings me to where I began: It is not our faith that can be destroyed by the anti-Catholicism of secular humanists. It is our nation, as it was conceived and dedicated by our forefathers, that is at risk.

That, I suggest, was what Pope John Paul was telling us.

Let us hope the message was heard.

Let us hope that Americans, of whatever faith, recognized in Denver the epitaph of Woodstock. And let us hope those unforgettable seventy-two hours will bring a reawakening to standards of decency ... self-discipline ... conscience – to the objective morality for which our society hungers.

I thank you.