

LIVING WITHIN THE TRUTH

(This article is an excerpt from an address given in Slovakia last year)

Living within the truth means living according to Jesus Christ and God's Word in Sacred Scripture. It means proclaiming the truth of the Christian Gospel, not only by our words but by our example. It means living every day and every moment from the unshakeable conviction that God lives, and that his love is the motive force of human history and the engine of every authentic human life. It means believing that the truths of the Creed are worth suffering and dying for.

Living within the truth also means telling the truth and calling things by their right names. And that means exposing the lies by which some men try to force others to live.

Two of the biggest lies in the world today are these: first, that Christianity was of relatively minor importance in the development of the West; and second, that Western values and institutions can be sustained without a grounding in Christian moral principles.

Before I talk about these two falsehoods, we should pause a moment to think about the meaning of history.

History is not simply about learning facts. History is a form of memory, and memory is a foundation stone of self-identity. Facts are useless without a context of meaning. The unique genius and meaning of Western civilization cannot be understood without the 20 centuries of Christian context in which they developed. A people who do not know their history, do not know themselves. They are a people doomed to repeat the mistakes of their past because they cannot see what the present—which always flowers out of the past—requires of them. People who forget who they are can be much more easily manipulated. This was dramatized famously in Orwell's image of the "memory hole" in his novel *1984*. Today, the history of the Church and the legacy of Western Christianity are being pushed down the memory hole. This is the first lie that we need to face.

Downplaying the West's Christian past is sometimes done with the best intentions, from a desire to promote peaceful co-existence in a pluralistic society. But more frequently it's done to marginalize Christians and to neutralize the Church's

public witness.

The Church needs to name and fight this lie. To be a European or an American is to be heir to a profound Christian synthesis of Greek philosophy and art, Roman law, and biblical truth. This synthesis gave rise to the Christian humanism that undergirds all of Western civilization.

On this point, we might remember the German Lutheran scholar and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He wrote these words in the months leading up to his arrest by the Gestapo in 1943: "The unity of the West is not an idea but a historical reality, of which the sole foundation is Christ."

Our societies in the West are Christian by birth, and their survival depends on the endurance of Christian values. Our core principles and political institutions are based, in large measure, on the morality of the Gospel and the Christian vision of man and government. We are talking here not only about Christian theology or religious ideas. We are talking about the moorings of our societies—representative government and the separation of powers; freedom of religion and conscience; and most importantly, the dignity of the human person.

This truth about the essential unity of the West has a corollary, as Bonhoeffer also observed: Take away Christ and you remove the only reliable foundation for our values, institutions and way of life.

That means we cannot dispense with our history out of some superficial concern over offending our non-Christian neighbors. Notwithstanding the chatter of the "new atheists," there is no risk that Christianity will ever be forced upon people anywhere in the West. The only "confessional states" in the world today are those ruled by Islamist or atheist dictatorships—regimes that have rejected the Christian West's belief in individual rights and the balance of powers.

I would argue that the defense of Western ideals is the only protection that we and our neighbors have against a descent into new forms of repression—whether it might be at the hands of extremist Islam or secularist technocrats.

But indifference to our Christian past contributes to indifference about defending our values and institutions in the present. And this brings me to the second big lie by which we live today—the lie that there is no unchanging truth.

Relativism is now the civil religion and public philosophy of the West. Again, the arguments made for this viewpoint can seem persuasive. Given the pluralism of the modern world, it might seem to make sense that society should want to affirm that no one individual or group has a monopoly on truth; that what one person considers to be good and desirable another may not; and that all cultures and religions should be respected as equally valid.

In practice, however, we see that without a belief in fixed moral principles and transcendent truths, our political institutions and language become instruments in the service of a new barbarism. In the name of tolerance we come to tolerate the cruelest intolerance; respect for other cultures comes to dictate disparagement of our own; the teaching of "live and let live" justifies the strong living at the expense of the weak.

This diagnosis helps us understand one of the foundational injustices in the West today—the crime of abortion.

I realize that the abortion license is a matter of current law in almost every nation in the West. In some cases, this license reflects the will of the majority and is enforced through legal and democratic means. And I'm aware that many people, even in the Church, find it strange that we Catholics in America still make the sanctity of unborn life so central to our public witness.

Let me tell you why I believe abortion is the crucial issue of our age.

First, because abortion, too, is about living within the truth. The right to life is the foundation of every other human right. If that right is not inviolate, then no right can be guaranteed.

Or to put it more bluntly: Homicide is homicide, no matter how small the victim.

Here's another truth that many persons in the Church have not yet fully reckoned: The defense of newborn and preborn life has been a central element of Catholic identity since the Apostolic Age.

I'll say that again: From the earliest days of the Church, to be Catholic has meant refusing in any way to participate in the crime of abortion—either by seeking an abortion, performing one, or making this crime possible through actions

or inactions in the political or judicial realm. More than that, being Catholic has meant crying out against all that offends the sanctity and dignity of life as it has been revealed by Jesus Christ.

The evidence can be found in the earliest documents of Church history. In our day—when the sanctity of life is threatened not only by abortion, infanticide and euthanasia, but also by embryonic research and eugenic temptations to eliminate the weak, the disabled and the infirm elderly—this aspect of Catholic identity becomes even more vital to our discipleship.

My point in mentioning abortion is this: Its widespread acceptance in the West shows us that without a grounding in God or a higher truth, our democratic institutions can very easily become weapons against our own human dignity.

Our most cherished values cannot be defended by reason alone, or simply for their own sake. They have no self-sustaining or “internal” justification.

There is no inherently logical or utilitarian reason why society should respect the rights of the human person. There is even less reason for recognizing the rights of those whose lives impose burdens on others, as is the case with the child in the womb, the terminally ill, or the physically or mentally disabled.

If human rights do not come from God, then they devolve to the arbitrary conventions of men and women. The state exists to defend the rights of man and to promote his flourishing. The state can never be the source of those rights. When the state arrogates to itself that power, even a democracy can become totalitarian.

What is legalized abortion but a form of intimate violence that clothes itself in democracy? The will to power of the strong is given the force of law to kill the weak.

Writing in the 1960s, Richard Weaver, an American scholar and social philosopher, said: “I am absolutely convinced that relativism must eventually lead to a regime of force.”

He was right. There is a kind of “inner logic” that leads relativism to repression.

This explains the paradox of how Western societies can preach tolerance and diversity while aggressively undermining and penalizing Catholic life. The dogma of tolerance cannot tolerate the Church’s belief that some ideas and behaviors

should *not* be tolerated because they dehumanize us. The dogma that all truths are relative cannot allow the thought that some truths might *not* be.

The Catholic beliefs that most deeply irritate the orthodoxies of the West are those concerning abortion, sexuality and the marriage of man and woman. This is no accident. These Christian beliefs express the truth about human fertility, meaning and destiny.

These truths are subversive in a world that would have us believe that God is not necessary and that human life has no inherent nature or purpose. Thus the Church must be punished because, despite all the sins and weaknesses of her people, she is still the bride of Jesus Christ; still a source of beauty, meaning and hope that refuses to die—and still the most compelling and dangerous heretic of the world's new order.

So where does this leave us? The world urgently needs a reawakening of the Church in our actions and in our public and private witness. The world needs each of us to come to a deeper experience of our Risen Lord in the company of our fellow believers. The renewal of the West depends overwhelmingly on our faithfulness to Jesus Christ and his Church.

We need to *really* believe what we say we believe. Then we need to prove it by the witness of our lives. We need to be so convinced of the truths of the Creed that we are on fire to live by these truths, to love by these truths, and to defend these truths, even to the point of our own discomfort and suffering.

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