

THE RIGHT TONIC: COMMON SENSE CATHOLICISM

Russell Shaw

Bill Donohue, *Common Sense Catholicism: How to Resolve Our Cultural Crisis* (Ignatius Press)

Imagine that dueling has been legalized in America. Imagine that two men decide to settle their differences by fighting a duel. What then? Bill Donohue points to some of the questions that then might very well be raised: "What if an arena agrees to host the event? What if a pay-for-view cable channel agrees to air the contest live? What if corporate advertisers jump at the chance to make money? What if everyone agrees that the winner gets to keep a hefty slice of the proceeds? What if a portion of the proceeds goes to fighting breast cancer?"

The answer, Donohue suggests, is all too obvious: "If the only value that matters is freedom of choice, then the duel is on."

Not to worry, Donohue isn't predicting the legalization of dueling, much less advocating it. This bit of fantasy is only meant to underline the craziness that surrounds the social acceptance of various aberrations already approved or currently being advocated, on the principle that the fundamental good to be preserved and promoted in the setting of social policy is the freedom to do as you please. (And dueling? The chances of dueling being legalized in America in the foreseeable future are of course somewhere between slight and nonexistent. Bear in mind, though, that the same thing was said not so long ago about same-sex marriage and, before that, about abortion. Like much else, social approval of bad policies and destructive practices occurs with breakneck speed these days.)

The little mind game about dueling is one of the small gems

buried in Donohue's new book, *Common Sense Catholicism* (Ignatius Press). The volume is a well reasoned, vigorously argued, immensely timely, and intensely serious defense of the wisdom embodied in the insights of the American founders and the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. Its practical relevance is clear from the subtitle: *How to Resolve Our Cultural Crisis*. If this won't do it, the reader comes away thinking, nothing short of some sort of social cataclysm will.

But what is the "common sense" that Donohue celebrates as the solution to our cultural ills? The dictionary defines it as "sound and prudent judgment based on a simple perception of the situation or facts." This is to say common sense is best understood as another name for the cardinal virtue of prudence as it is found in the Aristotelian-Thomistic catalogue of virtues.

Concerning prudence the eminent Thomist philosopher Joseph Pieper writes: "The meaning of the virtue of prudence...is primarily this: that not only the end of human action but also the means for its realization shall be in keeping with the truth of real things. This in turn necessitates that the egocentric 'interests' of man be silenced...so that reality itself may guide him to the proper means for realizing his goal." Prudence—common sense—understood this way is traditionally held to be first among the virtues, for without the well-balanced guidance of prudence, the other virtues are at risk of going awry, justice becoming rigorism, fortitude becoming rashness, and temperance becoming prudishness.

Bill Donohue has been fighting this particular good fight for many years as president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. *Common Sense Catholicism*, however, is not so much concerned to defend the Catholic Church against attacks as to tap the resources of the Catholic tradition as a service to the common good. Noting the alarming disarray of contemporary American culture, he states his case at the start:

“It wasn’t always this way, and it doesn’t have to be this way. Getting back on track, however, requires that we figure out what happened and why, and then apply the right remedies. To understand what ails us, we need to put aside the notion that our problems are fundamentally political and economic. They are not. American society is in trouble largely because our social and cultural house is broken....We have adopted policies, norms, and values that are at odds with some very fundamental truths governing human nature....The collapse of common sense is driving our derailment.”

The text that follows is divided into three large sections under the familiar catchwords of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity. There is deliberate irony in this of course, inasmuch as the vision of the French *philosophes* who provided intellectual underpinning for that historic outburst was grievously flawed, much like the rationalizing of today’s secular “deep thinkers” whom Donohue skewers mercilessly in his book but whose bad ideas so often shape our laws and policies.

Consider the prevailing confusion about that fundamental value, liberty. For many people today, liberty means freedom to do as you please. But it is the absolutizing of freedom of that sort which lies at the heart of so many of our largest social problems. Immature individuals tend naturally to suppose that this is the highest level of freedom; adolescents straining to shake off the requirements imposed by authority—parents, teachers, others in a position to tell them what to do—are seeking freedom to do as they please. But a more mature view of the matter suggests that merely doing as you please is neither the last word on liberty nor an unqualified good. To be sure, some degree of this sort of freedom is essential to moral responsibility. But for anyone living in social relationships with others, unconditional freedom to do as you please is impossible—and would be undesirable even if somehow possible.

Yet the assertion of a right to unconditional freedom of this kind now functions as a touchstone in setting social policy relating to questions of personal behavior. And not only adolescents think this way. For example, in a notorious opinion in 1992 affirming an unconditional right of unfettered access to abortion (*Planned Parenthood v. Casey*), three justices of the Supreme Court—Anthony Kennedy, Sandra Day O'Connor, and David Souter—delivered themselves of this remarkable sentiment: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”

Pause and let that sink in. Is the universe really whatever and however I choose to define it? Try telling that to someone—which is to say, everyone—who now and then knocks his or her head up against a hard, external something called reality. Yet just such balderdash lies at the very “heart of liberty” as it is understood by those who share the world view championed by Justices Kennedy, O'Connor, and Souter. One is reminded of something George Orwell, quoted by Donohue, once said: “One has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that: no ordinary man could be such a fool.” (It should come as no surprise that Justice Kennedy went on to write the Supreme Court’s majority opinion declaring a constitutional right to same-sex marriage.)

Absurd as it is, this view of liberty would nevertheless be merely amusing were it not for its profoundly destructive practical consequences. Not long ago I came across the following posted outside the office door of some people I know: “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” The source was identified as that enormously popular rock singer of the 1960s Janis Joplin, and an internet search showed that the line occurs in a Joplin song about a woman who has hit rock bottom after losing her boyfriend. While the song has a certain poignancy in depicting despair, what it says about freedom is self-pitying nihilism. This, you might say,

is where doing as you please and only that tragically ends. (Janis Joplin—God rest her soul—died of a heroin overdose in 1970.)

By contrast, there is the clear, sweet music of common sense in something like this from Donohue: “Our cultural crisis is our own doing. It can be undone, but only if we commit ourselves to creating a society of ordered liberty. Otherwise, we will collapse under the weight of rights run amuck. Freedom has a lovely face, but when it is distorted, there is nothing uglier.”

The disastrous social consequences of the embrace of individualistic doing-as-you-please may nowhere be more obvious in America today than in the calamitous decline of marriage and family life. Over the last seventy years, such causal factors as no-fault divorce, sexual libertinism, and legalized abortion have contributed to an ongoing social disaster now clearly visible in such things as the fact that four out of ten American children are now born out of wedlock (seven out of ten among blacks, five out of ten among Hispanics). The marriage rate has fallen below the rate at the depth of the Great Depression (7.9 per thousand in 1932, 6.9 per thousand in 2015), cohabiting adults numbered about 18 million in 2016 (an increase of 4 million in just nine years), and the birth rate reported last year by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention fell to a new low of about 60 per 1,000 women ages 15-44, well below the replacement rate. The U.S. has now joined Japan and the countries of Western Europe in the demographic winter.

In the hands of secularists, moreover, the ideology of do-as-you-please freedom readily operates as an engine driving social control and coercion. In this it mirrors the thinking of the spiritual father of the French Revolution, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in his influential *Social Contract* offered this chilling bit of counsel: “In order that the social compact may not be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the undertaking,

which alone gives force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free." And so the door is flung open for secularist ideologues to persecute dissenters in ways ranging from the Soviet Gulags to the hounding of bakers and florists who refuse in conscience to provide their services to same-sex marriage celebrations.

Near the end of *Common Sense Catholicism*, Bill Donohue says this: "The social teachings of the Catholic Church are ordered toward the good of individuals and society. They work because they are in harmony with human nature, respecting the limitations of the human condition...If freedom, equality, and fraternity are to be realized, we can do no better than to heed what the Church instructs us to do." As a realist, nevertheless, he knows perfectly well that this is a large order indeed at a time when the Catholic Church, far from being heeded, is itself often a target of scorn and derision while unconcealed persecution may perhaps lie just around the corner. "If our cultural crisis is to be rectified," Donohue writes, "we will have to stop treating the public expression of religion as if it were a problem. We need to get over our public phobia of religion."

Here's hoping that this invigorating book carries this message to many readers soon. The time may be shorter than we care to think.

Russell Shaw is the author of more than twenty books, and has served as communications director for the U.S. Bishops and information director for the Knights of Columbus. He is also a member of the Catholic League's board of advisers.