

Living Within the Truth: Christian Mission in the New Order of the World¹

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Tertullian once famously said that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church. History has proven that to be true. And Slovakia is the perfect place for us to revisit his words today. Here, and throughout central and eastern Europe, Catholics suffered through 50 years of Nazi and Soviet murder regimes. So they know the real cost of Christian witness from bitter experience – and also, unfortunately, the cost of cowardice, collaboration and self-delusion in the face of evil.

I want to begin by suggesting that many Catholics in the United States and Western Europe today simply don't understand those costs. Nor do they seem to care. As a result, many are indifferent to the process in our countries that social scientists like to call "secularization" – but which, in practice, involves repudiating the Christian roots and soul of our civilization.

American Catholics have no experience of the systematic repression so familiar to your Churches. It's true that anti-Catholic prejudice has always played a role in American life. This bigotry came first from my country's dominant Protestant culture, and now from its "post-Christian" leadership classes. But this is quite different from deliberate persecution. In general, Catholics have thrived in the United States. The reason is simple. America has always had a broadly Christian and religion-friendly moral foundation, and our public institutions were established as non-sectarian, *not* anti-religious.

At the heart of the American experience is an instinctive "biblical realism." From our Protestant inheritance we have always – at least until now – understood that sin is real, and men and women can be corrupted by power and

prosperity. Americans have often been tempted to see our nation as uniquely destined, or specially anointed by God. But in the habits of daily life, we have always known that the “city of God” is something very distinct from the “city of man.” And we are wary of confusing the two.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in his *Democracy in America*, wrote: “Despotism can do without faith, but liberty cannot...” Therefore, “What is to be done with a people that is its own master, if it is not obedient to God?”²

America’s founders were a diverse group of practicing Christians and Enlightenment deists. But nearly all were friendly to religious faith. They believed a free people cannot remain free without religious faith and the virtues that it fosters. They sought to keep Church and state separate and autonomous. But their motives were very different from the revolutionary agenda in Europe. The American founders did not confuse the state with civil society. They had no desire for a radically secularized public life. They had no intent to lock religion away from public affairs. On the contrary, they wanted to guarantee citizens the freedom to live their faith publicly and vigorously, and to bring their religious convictions to bear on the building of a just society.

Obviously, we need to remember that other big differences do exist between the American and European experiences. Europe has suffered some of the worst wars and violent regimes in human history. The United States has not seen a war on its soil in 150 years. Americans have no experience of bombed-out cities or social collapse, and little experience of poverty, ideological politics or hunger. As a result, the past has left many Europeans with a worldliness and a pessimism that seem very different from the optimism that marks American society. But these and other differences don’t change the fact that our paths into the future are now converging. Today, in an era of global interconnection, the challenges that confront Catholics in America are much the same as in Europe: We face an aggressively secular political vision and a consumerist economic model that result – in practice, if not in explicit intent – in a new kind of state-encouraged atheism.

To put it another way: The Enlightenment-derived worldview that gave rise to the great murder ideologies of the last century remains very much alive. Its language is softer, its intentions seem kinder, and its face is friendlier. But its underlying impulse hasn't changed – i.e., the dream of building a society apart from God; a world where men and women might live wholly sufficient unto themselves, satisfying their needs and desires through their own ingenuity.

This vision presumes a frankly “post-Christian” world ruled by rationality, technology and good social engineering. Religion has a place in this worldview, but only as an individual lifestyle accessory. People are free to worship and believe whatever they want, so long as they keep their beliefs to themselves and do not presume to intrude their religious idiosyncrasies on the workings of government, the economy, or culture.

Now, at first hearing, this might sound like a reasonable way to organize a modern society that includes a wide range of ethnic, religious and cultural traditions, different philosophies of life and approaches to living.

But we're immediately struck by two unpleasant details.

First, “freedom of worship” is *not at all* the same thing as “freedom of religion.” Religious freedom includes the right to preach, teach, assemble, organize, and to engage society and its issues publicly, both as individuals and joined together as communities of faith. This is the classic understanding of a citizen's right to the “free exercise” of his or her religion in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It's also clearly implied in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In contrast, freedom of *worship* is a much smaller and more restrictive idea.

Second, how does the rhetoric of enlightened, secular tolerance square with the *actual experience* of faithful Catholics in Europe and North America in recent years?

In the United States, a nation that is still 80 percent Christian with a high degree of religious practice, government agencies now increasingly seek to dictate how Church ministries should operate, and to force them into practices

that would destroy their Catholic identity. Efforts have been made to discourage or criminalize the expression of certain Catholic beliefs as “hate speech.” Our courts and legislatures now routinely take actions that undermine marriage and family life, and seek to scrub our public life of Christian symbolism and signs of influence.

In Europe, we see similar trends, although marked by a more open contempt for Christianity. Church leaders have been reviled in the media and even in the courts for simply expressing Catholic teaching. Some years ago, as many of you may recall, one of the leading Catholic politicians of our generation, Rocco Buttiglione, was denied a leadership post in the European Union because of his Catholic beliefs.

Earlier this summer we witnessed the kind of vindictive thuggery not seen on this continent since the days of Nazi and Soviet police methods: the Archbishop’s palace in Brussels raided by agents; bishops detained and interrogated for nine hours without due process; their private computers, cell phones, and files seized. Even the graves of the Church’s dead were violated in the raid. For most Americans, this sort of calculated, public humiliation of religious leaders would be an outrage and an abuse of state power. And this is *not* because of the virtues or the sins of any specific religious leaders involved, since we all have a duty to obey just laws. Rather, it’s an outrage because the civil authority, by its harshness, shows contempt for the beliefs and the believers whom the leaders represent.

My point is this: These are not the actions of governments that see the Catholic Church as a valued partner in their plans for the 21st century. Quite the opposite. These events suggest an emerging, systematic discrimination against the Church that now seems inevitable.

Today’s secularizers have learned from the past. They are more adroit in their bigotry; more elegant in their public relations; more intelligent in their work to exclude the Church and individual believers from influencing the moral life of society. Over the next several decades, Christianity will become a faith

that can speak in the public square less and less freely. A society where faith is prevented from vigorous public expression is a society that has fashioned the state into an idol. And when the state becomes an idol, men and women become the sacrificial offering.

Cardinal Henri de Lubac once wrote that “It is not true ... that man cannot organize the world without God. What *is* true, is that without God, [man] can ultimately only organize it against man. Exclusive humanism is inhuman humanism.”³

The West is now steadily moving in the direction of that new “inhuman humanism.” And if the Church is to respond faithfully, we need to draw upon the lessons that your Churches learned under totalitarianism.

A Catholicism of resistance must be based on trust in Christ’s words: “The truth will make you free.”⁴ This trust gave you insight into the nature of totalitarian regimes. It helped you articulate new ways of discipleship. Rereading the words of the Czech leader Václav Havel to prepare for this talk, I was struck by the profound Christian humanism of his idea of “living within the truth.”⁵ Catholics today need to see their discipleship and mission as precisely that: “living within the truth.”

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."⁶

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 that power to itself, 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.

That is where we are heading in the West today. And we’ve been there before. Slovaks and many other central and eastern Europeans have lived through it.

I suggested earlier that the Church’s religious liberty is under assault today in ways not seen since the Nazi and Communist eras. I believe we are now in the position to better understand why.

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.”⁷

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 behav-

iors 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.

Let me sum up what I’ve been saying.

My first point is this: Ideas have consequences. And bad ideas have bad consequences. Today we are living in a world that is under the sway of some very destructive ideas, the worst being that men and women can live as if God does not matter and as if the Son of God never walked this earth. As a result of these bad ideas, the Church’s freedom to exercise her mission is under attack. We need to understand why that is, and we need to do something about it.

My second point is simply this: We can no longer afford to treat the debate over secularization – which really means cauterizing Christianity out of our cultural memory – as if it’s a problem for Church professionals. The emergence of a “new Europe” and a “next America” rooted in something other than the real facts of our Christian-shaped history will have damaging consequences for every serious believer.

We need not and should not abandon the hard work of honest dialogue. Far from it. The Church always needs to seek friendships, areas of agreement, and ways to make positive, reasoned arguments in the public square. But it’s foolish to expect gratitude or even respect from our governing and cultural leadership classes today. Naïve imprudence is not an evangelical virtue.

The temptation in every age of the Church is to try to get along with Caesar. And it's very true: Scripture tells us to respect and pray for our leaders. We need to have a healthy love for the countries we call home. But we can never render unto Caesar what belongs to God. We need to obey God first; the obligations of political authority always come second. We cannot collaborate with evil without gradually becoming evil ourselves. This is one of the most vividly harsh lessons of the 20th century. And it's a lesson that I hope we have learned.

That brings me to my third and final point today: We live in a time when the Church is called to be a believing community of resistance. We need to call things by their true names. We need to fight the evils we see. And most importantly, we must not delude ourselves into thinking that by going along with the voices of secularism and de-Christianization we can somehow mitigate or change things. Only the Truth can set men free. We need to be apostles of Jesus Christ and the Truth he incarnates.

So what does this mean for us as individual disciples? Let me offer a few suggestions by way of a conclusion.

My first suggestion comes again from the great witness against the paganism of the Third Reich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "The renewal of the Western world lies solely in the divine renewal of the Church, which leads her to the fellowship of the risen and living Jesus Christ."⁸

The world urgently needs a re-awakening 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.

We are ambassadors of the living God to a world that is on the verge of for-

getting him. Our work is to make God real; to be the face of his love; to propose once more to the men and women of our day, the dialogue of salvation.

The lesson of the 20th century is that there is no cheap grace. This God whom we believe in, this God who loved the world so much that he sent his only Son to suffer and die for it, demands that we live the same bold, sacrificial pattern of life shown to us by Jesus Christ.

The form of the Church, and the form of every Christian life, is the form of the cross. Our lives must become a liturgy, a self-offering that embodies the love of God and the renewal of the world.

The great Slovak martyrs of the past knew this. And they kept this truth alive when the bitter weight of hatred and totalitarianism pressed upon your people. I'm thinking especially right now of Slovak heroic bishops, Blessed Vasil Hopko and Pavel Gajdos, and the heroic sister, Blessed Zdenka Schelingová.

We need to keep this beautiful mandate of Sister Zdenka close to our hearts:

“My sacrifice, my holy Mass, begins in daily life. From the altar of the Lord I go to the altar of my work. I must be able to continue the sacrifice of the altar in every situation. ... It is Christ whom we must proclaim through our lives, to him we offer the sacrifice of our own will.”⁹

Let us preach Jesus Christ with all the energy of our lives. And let us support each other – whatever the cost – so that when we make our accounting to the Lord, we will be numbered among the faithful and courageous, and not the cowardly or the evasive, or those who compromised until there was nothing left of their convictions; or those who were silent when they should have spoken the right word at the right time.

The Vocation of Christians in Public Life¹⁰

I write as a *Catholic* Christian and an *American* citizen – in that order. Both of these identities are important. They don't need to conflict. They are not, however, the same thing. And they do not have the same weight. I love my country.

⁹“Exiting a Dead End Road. A GPS for Christians in Public Discourse”: [more information or purchase.](#)

[Kairos Publications, 2010.](#)