

The Logic of Revival and Faith Formation

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The 2008 political campaign season, including both the presidential campaign and the many state ballot initiatives, provided numerous examples of how dialogue, reason, clear thinking and all the other virtues of a healthy democratic-republic were largely set aside. At most every turn it seemed that reasoned dialogue was silenced in favor of irrationality, understanding was argued away with equivocation, truth-seeking with shouted down by falsehoods, humbling honesty was pushed aside by lies, and selfless modesty was trampled upon by selfish promotion. Sadly overshadowed were faith and reason.

Reason alone and its virtuous twin, logic, however, are not always the best solution. That is the conclusion I arrived at over the past year while writing my series on the role of reason as the partner to faith titled *Trying to Fly with One Wing*. In Chapter 23, *Why Logic Doesn't Always Work*, I lamented that a person's will can lead to moral decisions contrary to what is logical, reasonable and true.

What came roaring back to my memory was this passage by St. Paul from 2 Timothy. Make note of this; its context comes up later and points to a way out of this mess:

For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to lies (1 Timothy 4:3-4).

During much of this election season, when moral truth tried to stand up and wave its tiny hand, it was unappreciated and shunned like a spent fuel rod from a decommissioned nuclear reactor. At one time truth had the capability to illuminate a whole city, but not often is it considered toxic waste.

The issues of this past season were considerably beyond former efforts at negotiating a common ground and shared vision among various social and economic issues. The calls to unite the country were, by some, scoffed at, and rightly so. Some proposals and candidates campaigned loudly for policies that are intrinsically evil and are devastating life and society. That such a large segment of the populace (let alone Catholic) could support as "normal and good" abortion, euthanasia, same-sex-marriage, homosexual civil rights, embryonic stem cell research, and a host of related policies and proposals proves to me that reason has lost its influence and that the truth, righteousness, grace and forgiveness of Christianity have truly been forgotten.

For decades I've advocated the commissioning of Christians to work on the frontlines of the culture as missionaries and influencers for all that is good, true, and beautiful. I've encouraged mature Christians to take leadership roles in film, broadcasting, journalism, and politics. But, it hasn't worked. Christians are either hiding in parish basements, choir nooks, or avoiding the Church altogether and allowing their consciences to be formed by pagan ideologies. Even

Church leaders, not wanting to be an offense to the lost that Christ loves, have been afraid to defend the truth and, instead, by their silence, have communicated to the world that the Church is ready to tolerate evil. One bishop recently confessed: "There are many times when fear impedes me from acting with what could be called holy boldness... The most serious threat to my well being, for acting with greater boldness, has been an intimation that I will be rejected, hated, ridiculed, rendered ineffective, deprived of financial support, judged to be insensitive, misunderstood, or verbally vilified." Society again has been left to the pagans.

WHERE IS THE MORAL BALLAST?

Today, in the shadow of the 2008 Presidential campaign, the moral prognosis of the United States is bleak as it tips on the precipice of hell. In every discipline, from economics to human rights, Christianity has been the moral ballast that has anchored and the fuel that has propelled the United States to world leadership. But Christians in America have been lured away from the safety of Christian truth by the country's declaration and incessant promotion of personal independence and so-called "rights" without regard for personal responsibility and accountability for the common good.

Rather than forming their consciences correctly, in order to be salt and light to the culture, too many Christians in general, and Catholics in particular, have wallowed in the spice and shadows of bodily self-indulgence rather than the sanctity of the heart. Without spiritual revival, conversion of hearts, and an incessant renewal, the destruction of life will continue and the destruction of America is inevitable.

The problem and the solution have been well documented by Catholic Bishops:

For although the Catholic Church has been endowed with all divinely revealed truth and with all means of grace, yet its members fail to live by them with all the fervor that they should, so that the radiance of the Church's image is less clear in the eyes of our separated brethren and of the world at large, and the growth of God's kingdom is delayed. All Catholics must therefore aim at Christian perfection and, each according to his station, play his part that the Church may daily be more purified and renewed. (Vatican II, 1964, Decree on Ecumenism, 4.6)

Many Catholics seem "lukewarm" in faith (cf. Rev 3:14ff.) or have a limited understanding of what the church believes, teaches, and lives. Others may know about the gospel message but have not personally experienced the risen Christ. Still others are indifferent to the Church's guidance or see the Church's teaching in a negative light (USCCB, 1999, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, 35).

Catholics have been mistakenly taught to keep their faith private and not bring offense to others. But this advice can easily be interpreted as hiding one's Christian witness under a basket, and being so tolerant of others that even evil is tolerated — a sin, in and of itself. Instead of being salt and light to culture, Catholics have been taught to blow out the candle and take the salt off the table.

At lunch during a recent Catholic conference I arrived late at a banquet table with my plate full of food. As I sat down among the other attendees, who were well into their entrées, I bowed my head, crossed myself, prayed silently over my food, and crossed myself again. As I began to eat a woman at the table asked "Do you do always that in public restaurants?" That referring to my public display of crossing-myself-and-prayer. She continued, "I've never seen anyone do that before in public." Remember? I said that this was at a Catholic conference. I replied to the lady

that I was trained as an Evangelical Christian to publicly profess Christ, and that if I didn't I could be assured of going straight to hell when I died. Her eyes got big.

I thought: Another prime example of how Catholics and other Christians have abdicated society to the pagans. It's no wonder we're in the current cultural mess.

A SOLUTION TO THE MESS

What's left?

Actually, something every important.

We might call it simply faith. Or, if we want to be more insistent, we can call it renewal. But I think a more proper word, considering the times we are in, is — revival. Let me put it this way: **REVIVAL!**

If I've learned one thing recently, it is this: The Church and country will not be saved through economic, social, or political processes, but only by the conversion of hearts to Jesus Christ and the pursuit of holiness. In short, the Catholic Church in America needs a good ole' fashion, holiness revival...followed up with an intense dose of on-going renewal.

The revival I'm talking about is not what the Church refers to as an "on-going conversion" — something that takes a lifetime and so people are constantly pushing it back. I'm talking about a cataclysmic life event, the earlier in life the better, where suddenly the scales of darkness fall off a person's soul, and in a moment they "see," with startling insight, the truth of Christianity. In a very short time, with fresh clarity, they understand the love of Jesus for them, and begin to pray and worship ceaselessly. With such a conversion comes a deep and abiding enthusiasm for the things of the Word of God and the teachings of the Church. Such a conversion suddenly finds people putting aside selfish desires, politically correct language, and an embrace of faith and reason with vitality.

Revival may be akin to a shotgun start, but it is no quick fix. While a revival can make people suddenly aware of the awesome gift of their faith, it will take a generation to truly inculcate a fresh, relevant faith into the culture. A spiritual revival of a fresh commitment to Jesus Christ would remove the basket that hides our witness, and allow the light of truth to shine on society. Sin cannot stand the light of truth. And when vibrant, vigorous Christians are embedded as salt in society, things will change for the good.

How best might we pursue a spiritual revival within Catholicism? Let me suggest three overlapping steps.

FIRST: Fast and pray for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the form of a spiritual revival among the faithful. Make fasting and prayer for this intention a continuous pattern for your life (Is 58).

SECOND: Conform your lives to righteousness and holiness. Make a continual effort to live under the grace of poverty, chastity, and obedience, seeking God's kingdom here on earth (Mt 6:33).

THIRD: Be accountable to your responsibilities to properly form the conscience of those under your influence. Launch a faith-wide initiative that I'm calling Best Practices of Faith Formation.

BEST PRACTICES OF FAITH FORMATION

It is in this third step that I think we need the most work, although efforts at Step 3 without Steps 1 and 2 will be for naught.

The Scripture passage from 2 Timothy above, that so aptly describes the current moral condition of the United States, is surrounded by St. Paul's explicit charge to Timothy to do something about it in regards to forming the faith of those under Timothy's influence — and indeed, I believe St. Paul's words are aimed directly at the Church today:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingly power: proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching... be self-possessed in all circumstances; put up with hardship; perform the work of an evangelist; fulfill your ministry (2 Timothy 4: 1-2,5).

Paul is charging Timothy and the elders under his leadership to form people in the faith. Notice the character of these words — ***persistent, inconvenient, reprimand, convince, with all patience, with hardship, fulfill your ministry, perform***. Those are not the words used to describe a feel-good week long Vacation Bible School with fun and games or adult Bible Study Fellowships where stomachs are stuffed rather than hearts. Those are words that describe due-diligence and hard work, over a lifetime.

That is my challenge. I invite you to read the entire proposal for a project whose mission is to discover, develop, demonstrate, and promote the best practices of faith formation to facilitate a spiritual revival and renewal of the Catholic Church in America so that the Church overflows with vitality and becomes the salt and light in society that Christ intended.

Read the proposal here: www.ninevehscrossing.com/BestPractices/index.html and please send me your comments at sdw@stanwilliams.com.

2 Comments For This Post from Catholic Exchange

1. Mickey Addison says:
November 20th, 2008 at 8:47 am

Amen.

2. Warren Jewell says:
November 20th, 2008 at 1:12 pm

This Dr. Stan Williams needs to pile all this together (Jeff Mirus of Trinity Communications is another such potent writer, among others) into books we can read over and over for both encouragement and inspiration.

And, we could use regular summer tent missions with several parishes working together to promote area missions - real Catholic revivals!