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SYMPOSIUM ON FAITH & SOCIETY

presentation by

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I was asked to share some insights from Benedict XVI that would be relevant to you as educators in a Catholic institution, and so I want to begin by underlining a point Benedict made that may have sounded pessimistic to some, but I think is simply a reflection of realities we have to face. He held out the very real possibility of a future where there may be fewer genuine Catholics and genuine Catholic institutions. How can such a statement be anything other than pessimistic? Part of it is indeed the rather sobering point that many of our Catholic institutions today are no longer really Catholic, and to the extent it remains that way in the future, to that extent the Church’s evangelizing mission is going to have to be carried out by some combination of the smaller number of truly faithful Catholic institutions remaining and, hopefully, newer ones that will take up the task. I do not see that as pessimistic, because I see many signs of life in the Church today. Certainly the overall trends, as the Pope notes, are negative, but I get letters in the mail every week from new religious communities of sisters that have many vocations. Cardinal Dolan honestly and refreshingly said recently that the Church has not done a good grassroots job of teaching the doctrine behind Humanae Vitae, yet there are a number of new books, articles and speakers presenting Catholic teaching out there with a kind of self-confidence and enthusiasm that I myself never heard at the Catholic universities I attended. At the Catholic universities I attended, one would get the impression that most people either did not believe in the teaching at all, or if they did they thought it best to be quiet about it. There are groups of ex-evangelicals going around, on fire for the faith, bringing people in. So, if, in the future, we will have to rely on smaller groups of fervent Catholics rather than much larger set of institutions where evangelical fervor has dried up, then that is not necessarily a bad development.

Given the predominant cultural and intellectual trends, it seems safe to predict that our claims as orthodox Catholics are likely to appear less and less credible. I use the word “appear” deliberately, because we also have to face the fact that we live more and more in a world of appearances. How do traditional Christians come off in popular entertainment and even in a lot of academia? That undoubtedly will make our job much more difficult, as people will tend to assume that we are out-of-touch, “living in the fifties,” harsh, judgmental, even cruel, cold-hearted and, of course, hypocritical. In addition to being grounded in truth, we are just going to have to be so much more fully witnesses to the gospel. Benedict speaks of genuinely vibrant groups where Christianity is lived intensely, and that is going to mean counter culturally. The title of one of Von Balthasar’s books, and it is a major theme in his theology is that “only love is credible.”
institutions like DeSales University, this is a challenge in one sense but a great opportunity as well. It is a challenge because even if you do a good job of presenting truth today, many will be deaf to it, because they have already rejected truth. By the way, Benedict makes a point of this in his writings. He discusses Romans I, where Paul is talking about the moral decadence of Rome in his time. Benedict underlines that Paul does not accept that ignorance is a justification for the morally upside-down world. He says, instead, that the truth is accessible to them, but they have rejected it. (Romans 1: 19-21). Benedict also underlines that this passage is astonishing today for its contemporary relevance. What this means for us is that we have to face the fact that we are in the midst of a world that has rejected God and is in need of conversion. Now, on the opportunity side, the truth is that the life of sin is really not making people happy, as much contemporary evidence shows, and that if love radiates out from our Catholic institutions, we can draw young people in. It is a pretty cold and competitive world out there, in which people do not feel loved, and so there are tremendous opportunities for loving communities of Catholics to draw people in and have a real impact. Fulton Sheen said years ago that holiness is the only argument left, and that is in many respects true. Without holiness and genuine Christian love, we are going to have credibility problems we cannot overcome. The truth must be proclaimed in an atmosphere of loving Christian community. Additionally, we need to be self-confident, but not proud or arrogant. Angry, defensive, and reactive postures do not help.

We have to recognize further what got us here. Although the megatrends of the contemporary culture, media, and intellectual life were probably going to produce a lot of harm under any circumstances, it was a spirit of accommodation to the surrounding culture that made it all much worse. Benedict has written a lot about Vatican II, its reception, and what went wrong. I will underline a few points here, all related to the last, key document, Gaudium et Spes, The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World. The arguments that occurred during the drafting in many ways foresaw the entire post Vatican II problem. Benedict notes that the document intended to be a kind of reconciliation with the world, an attempt to put behind the negative relationship prevailing since the French Revolution, and something of a counter-syllabus to Pius IX’s Syllabus of Errors. Two tendencies became paramount. On the one hand, the Church was trying to acknowledge its errors; on the other, it tried to underline the positive elements in the modern world. Genuine imbalances would develop, particularly after the Council, whereby some sectors of the Church would become almost ashamed of Catholic Tradition and history, accompanied by an equally exaggerated acceptance and praise of modernity. Some of the self-criticism was imbalanced and unevangelical in nature, failing to recognize that the Church’s history is culturally luminous, despite its flaws. Additionally, in some sectors there emerged an astonishing optimism that thought almost anything could happen with the union of the Church with the world newly constituted as dialog partner. Critical reserve was often cast aside. The characteristically modern attitude of optimism in a world without original sin had serious impacts within the Church itself. At times, in Gaudium et Spes, faith itself does not seem to be essential to the new Church-world dialog. It is not always clear in the document that the Christological and salvific elements of the faith are essential to the dialog. Indeed the world of faith appears as a secondary world in the Church-world dialog, a secondary world that people should not be prematurely and unnecessarily bothered by. There is a Christological theme in Gaudium et Spes, at times strongly expressed, but it appears not at all in the Preface, wherein the predominant lines of interpretation were established. After the Council, the de-emphasis on the Christological and eschatological elements of faith led to the elimination of all dualisms. Body-soul, Church-world, grace-nature, even god-world, all were de-emphasized or even written off, in ways incompatible with Church Tradition and the Gospel. References to the political
world in particular tend to play down the role of Christ in establishing solidarity among nations. At
times it seems that the role of the Holy Spirit is limited to assisting man in his development.
Discontinuity between the world’s development and God’s judgment, indeed the whole
eschatological dimension is referenced, but does not seem central to the dialogical process by which
Church and world work together to make the world better. In many respects, these tendencies in the
Council only worsened afterward, and as the realities of sin and what Benedict calls the “eerie two-
faced quality of progress” continued to make their presence known, disillusionment set in. But it
was to some extent the overly optimistic attitudes reflected especially in the preliminary drafts of
_Gaudium et Spes_ that were partly to blame.

In the United States, the spirit of accommodation to the prevailing ethos has been a great
intensifier of the problem. If we look back, there was the belief in a fundamental compatibility
between the original American ideal of church-state separation, and the role of religion in culture
broadly speaking, that Catholics could accept with enthusiasm, anti-Catholicism in the culture
notwithstanding. The church was free to evangelize and establish institutions of charitable works
and education, all of which furthered the evangelizing mission. The culture was predominantly
Christian, and religion played a public role informing culture and the law. However, when the
culture began to shift and secularize, the American Catholic spirit of accommodation was not self-
correcting. So attached to the spirit of accommodation, Catholics in the United States mostly seem
preoccupied with fitting into the culture than informing it. Accommodationism prompted the
tragedy whereby instead of helping to shape a public ethos consistent with its principles, Catholics
have largely followed the leads of the secular culture. Catholics tend to line up along the ideological
left-right continuum much as their compatriots. Catholics on the left and the right seem all too
willing to sell out the Church’s teaching to follow either the left or right’s interpretation of the
American way. After this last election cycle, it now seems quasi-official that there are variously
termed “pro-life” and “traditional” Catholics vs. “social justice” Catholics, which I think we can
safely take to mean that for many Catholics, commitment to ideology and Party prevail over
commitment to Church teaching.

I am aware that it is a theme among some Catholics that America remains culturally far more
religious than Europe, and I do not deny the evidence, but I have very little faith in the current state
of Christianity in this country. There is a lot of religiosity and professed Christianity, but it all seems
hopelessly riddled with the prevailing anti-religious culture, by which I mean to say that American
religion is caught up in subjectivism, relativism, ideology, and an a-historicity that is truly
breathtaking. More and more the American Christian has no coherent understanding of the meaning
of Christianity as it applies to any number of areas, and this largely because they have no grasp of
Christian history or even doctrine. Naïve, ahistorical and un-theological biblicism is not a formula for
cultural renewal.

As to the content of contemporary culture, Benedict underscores the tendency of a kind of
radical secularism. This is more than simply the reason uninformed by faith of Socrates, Plato and
Aristotle. Reason itself is not closed to God. The disturbing feature of our time is the emergence of
a new culture seeking to exclude God from cultural, intellectual and political life according to an
interpretation of rationality that excludes God, making God irrelevant to cultural, intellectual and
legal life. In Europe, they draft a Constitution making no reference to Christianity as one of the
sources of Europe. Faith is no longer even recognized historically for its influences on culture and
the law. It is this radical secularization, which amounts to a falsification of history in many respects,
that Benedict has in mind when he uses the now widely-quoted phrase “the dictatorship of relativism.” It is “the absolutization of a way of thinking and living that is radically opposed to all the other historical cultures of humanity. It is a consciousness that wants to see God eradicated from the public life of humanity and shut up in the subjective sphere of cultural residues from the past. It is dogmatism that believes it is in possession of the true state of affairs concerning human knowledge, with a right to relativize everything else. “The new culture is based on the new politicized morality of the 60’s and 70’s. He calls it the “morality of the big words,” for it talks always in terms of social justice, human rights, freedom and equality, yet leaves these rather vaguely defined, or defined in ways at odds with traditional understandings. It is characteristic of this morality that it seems to turn to the state as the principle means of imposition. This mentality has penetrated Christian circles, where there is much discussion of “the kingdom,” “the values of the kingdom,” terms which, when applied to politics, are open to almost any kind of abuse. The primary sense of sin as a personal offense against God is largely pushed aside in favor of a politicized understanding of morality. Of course, Benedict in no way means to downplay or cast aspersions here on the valid interpretations of human rights and social justice embodied in CST.

To straighten this mess out, we can consult the work of Benedict, who writes extensively on the real relationship between faith and reason. Benedict is fond of noting that Christianity, from the first words of John’s Gospel, is the religion of the Logos, that is, it is a belief that God created a universe full of diverse beings of different natures, each of which has its ends and purposes inscribed within it by God’s eternal reason. As Aquinas so beautifully explained, the great gift of reason is a limited capacity to discern the eternal reason of God. Through reason, we can have a real understanding of our nature, and the ends and purposes of our human life. When, therefore, we perceive the natural connection among sexual activity, marriage, and family, we are truly seeing reality as it was made. God inscribes within our nature inherent ends and purposes we can understand. Reason is created by God, and finds its true home only in the universe that God actually created. So, the truth is that faith exalts reason, and does by declaring that reason gives us a real though limited understanding of God’s creative intentions. Benedict adds that if we reject this foundation, and assert that we are merely the products of physical, chemical and biological evolutionary processes, without any intelligence behind it, then reason is really nothing special. It is just a name we give to chemical activities in the brain, not necessarily any better or worse than other chemical activities in the brain that motivate us to have sex or get angry and jealous at other people. In the godless universe, why is reason more important than biological drive or instinct? It is a chemical process to be superseded perhaps by something else at a higher level of evolutionary process. But, in the Christian perspective, reason is permanently exalted as the special human capacity to discern the intentions of God and derive moral conclusions therefrom, e.g. that sex was linked to procreation, and for the good of man, woman and child, should take place in the context of a permanent commitment between a man and a woman.

The point I want to underline here is that the assertion of the link among marriage, family and children, which morally frowns on extra-marital sexual activity is an entirely reasonable belief, and it is those who negate it through the attempts to legitimate extramarital sex, or through attempts to systematically separate sex from procreation who are offending against reason, not us. To state it more clearly, the religious teaching and the reasonable teaching are one and the same. In the sphere of morality, the religious teaching, the 10 Commandments, are the roots of the entire moral order, preserving reason. And this is why the “pro-choice” Catholic politicians who have been trying to market acceptance of abortion for thirty years have it exactly wrong. According to them,
the Church’s moral teachings are not truths of reason, but truths of faith, which cannot be imposed on others. Using the same line of reasoning, we should purge the civil law of all traces of all the 10 commandments. We should eliminate all laws that are rooted in the moral judgments of the 10 commandments for that would be imposing a mere belief on someone else. So, all laws that forbid various forms of lying, stealing and recourse to violence must be taken off the books because they are based on a religiously-rooted morality. This is silly and we all know it. When the Church teaches that life begins at conception, this is a truth fully supported by reason. When the Church says that the state exists to preserve life, that too is a truth of reason. There is a fundamental demand on us precisely as rational beings to preserve life.

Lies and errors travel together, and mutually support one another. The error that moral claims grounded in religion are not grounded in reason has a traveling companion, and that is moral relativism. Although we could talk about its impacts in many ways, I will focus on the area where it has brought a lot of havoc, and that is the proper uses of human sexuality. The relativist claims not to know what sex is for, and that therefore the choices of sexual restraint outside marriage, sexual purity within it, and the commitment to marriage and family are in every case one choice among a set of equally valid ones. No one can say that chastity is better than its opposite. We must be tolerant of those who embrace the opposite views. We are told further that tolerance so conceived is the true basis of democracy, and that it is we moral absolutists who are the real threat to democracy. These people do not know the real roots of democracy in the West. In truth, the first principle that sets us on the road to democratic government properly conceived is the realization that there is a moral law rooted in our nature that stands above the government and the fundamental human law or Constitution. This moral law is not the creation of the government. The government is limited by it and is not free to change it. This is the very first principle of democratic government, and its negation is the road to political absolutism and unlimited, totalitarian government. Once the universal moral law, or natural law is denied, then government is free to do whatever it can get away with, and history demonstrates that even a written constitution with protections for rights fails once the government is free to interpret it without reference to the moral law. Benedict mentions that the Nazis did not bother in many cases to change the Constitution of the Weimar Republic which had rights written into it. They saw that these alleged rights were no real obstacle once the government assumed the right to interpret them without reference to any higher law. This is by the way a very important lesson for us. We can see that the Constitution protects us from nothing once the principles of interpretation exclude any reference to a higher law grounded in fixed understandings. As we have seen already, the understanding of rights can be twisted to approve of almost anything.

Two important points in closing. First, concerning faith and reason there are two categories of pathologies, not one. The one broadly recognized today is faith without reason, or fundamentalism, wherein religious claims are held to be superior to and independent of reason. This leads to irrationality and violence and intolerance. Religious claims never subject to rational discernment.

But there is a second pathology, far less recognized, and that is reason completely and deliberately cut off from religion. Religion preserves the first principles of morality that are difficult to maintain in its absence. Without the firm absolutes of a law that comes from God, human beings tend to be less moral. When the exclusion of God as the source of norms itself becomes a kind of dogma, as in secularism today, there is a decided tendency to reject even the basics of common
moral sense. Benedict notes that this leads to the undermining of the roots of reason itself. Reason absolutizes itself but loses in the process any clear sense of direction. The results are no victory for reason. Three examples. A French Court ruled a little over a decade ago that there was a “right not to be born,” which applied to people born handicapped. We have the case of a well-known ethics professor who believes there exists a right to kill an infant six months old for reasons of disability. Third, there is the feminist professor who believes that all heterosexual activity is like rape. Where do you find believers in such statements? Not in the fundamentalist churches. They won’t buy it. Sadly, the only believers in propositions of this kind are people who embrace radical secularism in academia. So, let us not fool ourselves as to what kind of culture radical secularism will lead us to. It leads us to a world without faith or reason. Perhaps I can close by quoting Chesterton, whose point is the same as Benedict’s here. The problem with the loss of faith is not that men come to believe in nothing, but that they believe in anything.

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