

WISDOM, CHRISTIAN WITNESS AND THE YEAR OF FAITH

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A long time ago in Germany, a man kept a diary. And some of his words are worth sharing today, because they're a good place to begin our discussion.

The man wrote: "Speak both to the powerful and to every man -- whoever he may be -- appropriately and without affectation. Use plain language. Receive wealth or prosperity without arrogance, and be ready to let it go. Order your life well in every single act. Behave justly to those who are around you. Be vigilant over your thoughts, so that nothing should steal into them without being well-examined."

He wrote: "Every moment, focus steadily on doing the task at hand with perfect and simple dignity, and with feelings of affection and freedom and justice. Put away hypocrisy. Put away self-love and discontent with your portion in life. We were made for cooperation, and to act against one another is contrary to nature. Accept correction gladly. Teach without anger. Keep yourself simple, good, pure, serious, a friend of justice, kind, affectionate and strenuous in all proper acts."

Finally, he wrote: "Take care never to feel toward those who are inhuman, the way they feel toward other men."

The dictionary in my home defines wisdom as "the understanding and pursuit of what is true, right or lasting." If that's so, and I believe it is, the words from the diary we just heard are wisdom. They offer us a map to living a worthy life -- a life of interior peace flowing out of moral character and purpose. They're as valuable today as when they were first written.

But what's interesting is this: They were written more than 1,800 years ago. The author probably didn't intend to see his work published. He wrote mainly for himself -- to strengthen his convictions. And many of his thoughts, which we now call the *Meditations*, were written at war, at night, in winter, from the inside of a Roman military tent, on the German frontier. In his 19 years as emperor, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus had no long period of peace. He spent much of his life away from Rome with the army. He fought one brutal war after another against invaders, and he did it to defend a society that had already lost the values he held dear. Moreover, in the long run he failed. The barbarians won. Rome rotted out and unraveled. His own son Commodus became one of the worst tyrants in history.

So why do we remember him? We remember him because nothing is more compelling than a good man in an evil time. Marcus Aurelius held absolute power in a corrupt age. Yet despite that, he chose to seek what is true and right and lasting; and he disciplined his own life accordingly. In the context of his time, he was a just man and a moral ruler. He achieved that dignity of character by giving his heart first to the pursuit of wisdom, and only then to Rome. He had a brilliant mind, but he had no love of intellect purely for the sake of intellect. Rather, he had a special disgust for intelligence without moral purpose.

That's why he's important for us today. He pursued wisdom above everything else. And though his beliefs were very different from our own, we can learn from his example. Those three qualities that Marcus Aurelius sought in his own life -- the true, the right and the lasting -- are the pillars of the world. They're the tripod that supports a meaningful life. Whether rich or poor, emperor or peasant, Christian or pagan, *all* people in every age have a hunger for meaning in their lives.

That hunger is a clue to the nature of our humanity. It's a sign that points to what Jesus said to Satan: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). Power, sex, knowledge, money, possessions -- none of these things finally lasts. They're narcotics. They can dull our inner hunger, but they can't make it go away. Wisdom consists in turning our hearts to the search for what *does* satisfy that hunger, and then pursuing it with all our strength.

That brings me to the three simple points I want to put before you today.

Here's my first point: The more secular we become, the less we care about the true, the right and the lasting. And here's the reason: We don't really believe they exist. Or we simply don't care.

The word "philosophy" comes from the Greek words *philia*, which means love, and *sophia*, which means wisdom. In an earlier age, philosophy fed man's nobility; it involved the love and pursuit of wisdom. Academic philosophy today is a shadow of its historic dignity in the Western tradition. It's an ailing discipline because it has collapsed into either postmodern skepticism or materialistic scientism, and neither has any place for wisdom or love. The postmodern cynic rejects the search for higher, permanent truths about the human person as a kind of ideological power grab. And the materialist philosopher rejects the search because it demands going beyond what we can confirm in a laboratory.

As a result, our idea of "wisdom" has shriveled down to mean, *at best*, a kind of common sense based on experience; and *at worst*, a cheap and clever irony.

Real wisdom grows from the moral memory of a culture. The more we debunk and reinterpret the past according to some political or social scientific agenda, the less coherent our memory becomes, and the more irrelevant wisdom like the Bible seems. This results in a kind of rootlessness, a self-imposed amnesia, and it undermines our

whole moral vocabulary. It also leads us to see and judge everything in terms of its utility, right here and right now. What's useful and productive, is judged good. What isn't, is judged bad.

Here's my second point: Just as we transferred our belief in God to a belief in ourselves beginning with the Enlightenment, now we're shifting a belief in ourselves to a belief in our tools under the cover of a scientific and technological revolution. To put it another way: Losing faith in God inevitably results in losing faith in man, because only God can guarantee man's unique dignity. Without God, we turn ourselves into the objects and the victims of our own knowledge. And we're now doing that at a moment when our tools have more destructive power than at any time in history.

This is why the witness of the Church is so important. The Church, as G.K. Chesterton once said, is the only thing that saves a man from the "degrading slavery of being a child of his age." What he meant is this: People who conform their hearts to the ideas of the age disappear right along with the age. Nothing is older than yesterday's "new thing" and the people who worshiped it. We were created to live in the present, worship God in the present, serve the poor in the present, and support each other in the present -- but to ready ourselves for eternity.

*That brings me to my third point: I believe that it's exactly this vocation -- this eternal perspective -- that makes the Church the most reliable bearer of wisdom for the contemporary world. No one knows the human soul and the human experience as well as the Church. No one believes in the human enterprise more deeply than the Church. And that creates an interesting irony: In his lifetime, Marcus Aurelius bitterly persecuted Christians for being superstitious, obstinate and seditious. But he did so *not* out of personal cruelty, or corruption, or arrogance, *but out of piety for the old gods*. If he were alive today, and alive with the same hunger for wisdom, he might see the world very differently. It might even be tempting to imagine him as a Christian -- because what he sought from life in his own time, only the Church really offers today.*

Now let's revisit these three points in a little more detail.

Regarding my first point: The more secular we become, the less we care about the true, the right and the lasting. At the heart of the secular – or maybe the better word is “secularist” -- worldview are several key ideas. They go like this: God doesn't exist; or if he does, he's irrelevant to our public life. Religion is dangerous, or at least suspect, because it divides people with conflicting fairytales about the purpose of life. What matters is material reality, here and now; and the principles governing our behavior here and now will change as our needs and circumstances change. Finally, a good society is one that provides the most material benefits to the greatest number of people. What we perceive as true and right is conditioned by our circumstances, and nothing lasts because our needs change.

Obviously I'm oversimplifying a complex social reality, but not by so very much. Wisdom in this kind of environment shrinks into sophistry or cynicism. And that's

exactly what has happened. We've become skeptical about our ability to really "know" anything, and we've simply stopped asking profound questions. We no longer really look for the true, the right and the lasting because we don't really believe they exist outside our own brain chemistry. We're agnostic about human meaning in the same way we're agnostic about God.

Let's move on to my second point: We stopped believing in God and began believing in ourselves. Now we're losing our faith in ourselves and putting our faith in our tools. We're becoming the objects and the victims of our own knowledge. Forty years ago, if a scientist talked about hybridizing embryos to produce people to do certain jobs or live in certain environments, he was dismissed as a lunatic or a monster. Now we talk about the practical benefits of "perfecting" the human gene code, and the potential profits.

What we risk creating is a culture of unthinking scientific and technological boosterism. In some ways, it's already here. In the words of Leon Kass, the distinguished physician and University of Chicago scholar of social thought:

"The pursuit of [human perfection] scientifically defined and technically advanced, not only threatens to make us more intolerant of imperfection. It also threatens to sell short the true possibilities of human flourishing, which are to be found in love and friendship, work and play, art and science, song and worship . . . We triumph over nature's unpredictabilities only to subject ourselves, tragically, to the still greater unpredictability of our capricious wills and our fickle opinions."ⁱ

To put it even more bluntly: We're fooling ourselves if we think our love affair with science is intellectually chaste, a kind of high-minded romance with knowledge. Chaste it's not. Knowledge is power, and what Americans really love is the power knowledge brings – the power to penetrate, dominate and exploit the natural world.

Exactly 70 years ago, C.S. Lewis very shrewdly observed that "There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the wisdom of earlier ages. For the wise men of old, the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline and virtue. [But] for magic and applied science alike, the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men; the solution is a technique; and both, in the practice of this technique, are ready to do things hitherto regarded as [terrible and] impious . . ."ⁱⁱ

Americans love science for the technology we can extract from it, and technology does not have a conscience. As easily as it gives us iPads and smart phones, it also gives us Nagasaki, Zyklon B gas, genetic screening and abortion pills. The more we subordinate the sanctity of the human person to the tools we create, the less human we become. Our job as Christians is to remind our culture that true and right and lasting things *do* exist about human nature -- and if we abandon these things, we abandon who we are, and we abandon those who need us to speak on their behalf.

Which brings us to revisit my third and final point: The Church is the most reliable bearer of wisdom in the contemporary world; and the most reliable defender of the human person. That's a very big claim, especially in light of the many sins people in the Church, including her leaders, have committed down through the centuries. But it's also the truth. The Church has *always* existed for sinners. Her wisdom lies in seeing the world as God sees it; seeing the human person with the love and mercy that moved Jesus to weep at the tomb of Lazarus.

The Church knows, as Ecclesiastes reminds us, that "there is nothing new under the sun" (1:9). The terrain of the world changes, but the nature of the human journey doesn't. The poet Rainer Marie Rilke once described man as "by turns, clay and stars."ⁱⁱⁱ It has always been so. Man is a creature of animated carbon, but every life also has a higher purpose. We're meant for more than this time and place. Yesterday, today and tomorrow, the human struggle is always the same: We're in this world, and yet we hunger for the next; we're imperfect, and yet we're made for perfection.

The Church knows, as the Psalms and Proverbs teach, that only "the mouths of the righteous speak wisdom;" that "happy is the man that finds wisdom" for wisdom is "the principal thing;" and that wisdom is a treasure "more precious than rubies." We're put in the world to seek the truth. We thirst for it. We can't be happy without it.

The Church also knows, with Sirach, that "to fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (1:14). Why? Because God is the source and meaning of our lives, and humility in God's presence, which is just another name for "fear of the Lord," is the sign of a sane person -- a person who understands the real nature of creation, and humanity's holy place in it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Lutheran pastor and theologian, once wrote that the wise man "knows that reality is not built upon [materialist] principles, but that it rests upon the living and creating God." He prayed often for simplicity, and he warned that "the best informed man is not necessarily the wisest. Indeed there is a danger that *precisely* in the multiplicity of his knowledge, he will lose sight of what is essential."^{iv} To put it another way: Wisdom comes to the humble, not to the proud. And that simple truth may help us understand the moment we've arrived at in the life of our nation.

In his dissent from the June 26 Supreme Court *Windsor* decision that struck down the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), Justice Antonin Scalia correctly named the arrogance, the power grab and the eager, oddly moralizing spirit at the heart of the court's majority opinion. The *Windsor* ruling accuses DOMA and its supporters of deliberately seeking to injure same-sex couples through an "unjust exclusion" of their relationships from the benefits of marriage.

The court's reasoning is not just wrong, and not just a case of raw judicial overreach. It's also baffling in its logic. "To defend traditional marriage," wrote Scalia, "is not to condemn, demean or humiliate those who would prefer other arrangements, any more than to defend the Constitution of the United States is to condemn, demean or humiliate

other constitutions.” Supporters of traditional marriage, Scalia said, are simply defending a reality of marriage “unquestioned in virtually all societies for virtually all of human history.”

By attributing ill will to the supporters of DOMA, Scalia noted, the majority opinion demeaned the court itself, demeaned the people’s elected representatives, and set the stage for imposing same-sex “marriage” nationally, whether the public wants it or not.

It took less than 30 years for abortion to go from a crime against humanity at Nuremburg to a constitutional right. It’s taken even less time for disordered sexuality to become sacralized in law and redirect the course of our culture. People unwise enough to accept a slogan like “marriage equality” without challenging its honesty and examining its massive implications, are people capable of doing things even more foolish. And even more damaging.

And if we think we have some kind of safe haven from these events in America’s tradition of religious freedom, we should probably think again. Despite months of confusing talk about compromise, the administration’s June 28 final wording of the HHS contraceptive mandate conceded almost nothing to the concerns of its opponents. It continues to be unneeded. It continues to be coercive. It continues to impose on the nation a false need for contraceptive services in medical coverage. And it continues to violate the rights of religious and moral conscience. It’s a monument to ideological pride and belligerence.

In a few months we’ll close out the Year of Faith that began under Pope Benedict and was highlighted so beautifully just three days ago in Pope Francis’ first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*. In the past year – in fact, in *every* year now, according to the Holy See – more than 100,000 Christians are killed worldwide for reasons related to their faith.^v That’s the real cost of discipleship. That’s a measure of heroic character.

I’ve spoken many times about the importance of religious freedom and the need for all of us to actively witness our Christian faith not only in our private lives but also in the public square. The sacrifice of Christians in other countries, who write their witness in their own blood, places an obligation on all of us to live our faith with courage and zeal, endurance and hope, and to begin every new day by grounding our hearts and our actions in the wisdom of the Church.

Nothing is more compelling than a good man, or a good woman, in an evil time. Wisdom is the pursuit of the true, the right and the lasting. In the record of Scripture and the witness of the Church, all these things find their source in God, and nowhere else but God.

Genesis tells the story of the Tower of Babel (11:1-9), and it carries a useful lesson. The pride of men in seeking “to make a name for [themselves]” and to build a tower to heaven leads God to confuse man’s language and scatter humanity. But I think God intervened against Babel not to punish man but to save humanity from itself. In the Bible

passage, God says, "If now, while they are one people all speaking the same language, they have started to do this, nothing will later stop them from doing whatever they presume."

In an age of genetics, neuroscience and nanotechnology; an age of political arrogance; an age that refuses to admit the purpose of human sexuality, or even that man himself has an inherent identity, free will or nature, those words from Scripture should make each of us pause.

In his great work, *The City of God*, St. Augustine created a portrait of the world divided into two cities -- the City of God with its eyes set on heaven, and the City of Man rooted in pride and sin. Life consists in choosing one or the other. It's a choice we can't avoid. And each of us faces that choice right here, today, *now*. The wisdom which the Church offers the world is for the humble, not the proud, and it's the only wisdom that counts: the path to salvation.

But this salvation is not a philosophy or an ideology, an idea or ideals. No one can "love" an idea, and yet the heart of real wisdom is the ability and willingness to love. Augustine says that all of the wisdom in the Old Testament literally takes on flesh in the New Testament. The reason is simple. Jesus Christ is the Word of God -- the Wisdom of God -- God as love incarnate. Jesus himself says, "I am the bread of life." He says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

No one can love an idea. But we can love and be loved by Jesus Christ. We can meet and be met by God's Son. The true, the right and the lasting meet in a Man. Our task is to follow him, no matter what the cost, and to lead others to do the same.

ⁱ Leon Kass, M.D., "A More Perfect Human: The Promise and Peril of Modern Science," remarks at the United States Holocaust Museum, March 17, 2005

ⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, Macmillan, New York, 1955 edition

ⁱⁱⁱ From the Rilke poem *Abend* ("Evening")

^{iv} Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Macmillan, New York, 1978 edition

^v From remarks by Archbishop Silvano Maria Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, Geneva, May 27, 2013