

CHANGING OUR CULTURE WITH THE FIRE OF FAITH

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My task today is talking about our culture, and how we might change and renew it. And I'm glad to do that. But I'd like to begin with a few observations.

Some years ago I was browsing through the newspapers, and I came across a story from The New York Times. The headline read: "*Why the ignorant are blissful: Inept individuals ooze confidence, study shows.*" It turns out that David Dunning, a professor at Cornell University, did a study of incompetence. And what he found is that most incompetent people *don't know* they're incompetent. In fact, people who do things badly tend to be very confident about their ability. They're often *more* confident than the people who do things well.

Dunning went on to find that the ignorant overestimate their abilities for a good reason. The skills they lack for competence are usually the *same* skills they need to recognize their own incompetence. In fact, according to one of Dunning's colleagues, "not only do [incompetent people] reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it."¹

I should add that, as a result of his study, Dr. Dunning soon began worrying about his own competence.

Now that's a true story, and we can smile at it. But the lesson we need to draw from it today is a serious one. As a nation and as individuals, we're not as smart as we think we are. What we learned – or should have learned -- from 9/11, Iraq and Afghanistan, is that we stumble and bleed just like everyone else. We pay for our overconfidence and self-absorption just like everyone else. Fools with tools are still fools. Technology, wealth and power may feed our vanity, but they're not the same as wisdom, moral purpose and character. And they don't give us any security, because only God can do that.

I believe that Americans are a great people, a *good* people, and that even today, America remains a great experiment in human dignity. But it's an experiment that depends on our respect for the sanctity of the human person. And "sanctity" is an idea that makes no sense without God, who seems less and less welcome in our national discourse. The historian Gertrude Himmelfarb once noted that America in our lifetime is "living off the religious capital of a previous generation, and [that] capital is being perilously depleted." When the capital is gone, we may not like the results, because the more we delete God from our public life and our private behavior, the more we remove the moral vocabulary that gives our culture meaning.

We need to understand that the more secular we become, the more our sense of community erodes, and the more we feed four problems that cripple us as a society.

Here's the first problem: *More and more often, we're unable to think clearly.* The American Founders created a political system that depends for its success on a literate, reasoning population grounded in moral maturity. Reasoning requires time. It demands a reverence for ideas. It involves the testing and comparison of arguments. But the America we have today is a culture built on marketing -- and marketing works in exactly the opposite way. Marketing appeals to desire and emotion. It depends on the suppression of critical thought, because thinking can get in the way of buying the product or believing the message. And that explains why marketing is tied so tightly to images. Images operate below the radar of critical thought. This is why car dealers put an attractive female model next to their latest sports car, instead of a stack of performance statistics.

Here's the second problem: *More and more often, we're unable to remember.* The scholar and critic Christopher Lasch often argued that Americans have an addiction to the new. We're a people of the "now." We enjoy nostalgia, because it's a kind of entertainment. But we don't really like *history* because the past -- as it really happened -- burdens us with memories and unfinished business. It imposes obligations on the present. Americans like to think that we can invent and reinvent ourselves, unencumbered by our mistakes and promises. But the cost of that illusion is that we tend to have a very poor grasp of history. We learn too little, too late, from the lessons of the past.

Here's problem three: *More and more often, we're unable to imagine and hope.* At least until recently, Americans have never been ideologues. We're pragmatists and toolmakers. We believe in results. So it's really no surprise that we built the strongest economic machine in the world; or that we excel at science and technology; or that these disciplines enjoy such esteem in our culture.

But science and technology always carries with them a "revenge of unintended consequences." And one of the unintended consequences of our science is that we've become its objects and its victims. C.S. Lewis saw this coming 70 years ago when he published his extraordinary book, *The Abolition of Man*. The price tag for our science has been a decline in our vocabulary of the soul, a rise in the materialist view of the world, and a collapse in our confidence that humanity is somehow unique or sacred in creation. Hope and imagination depend on things we can't measure. They flow out of a belief in a higher purpose to our lives. If all we are is a collection of intelligent carbon atoms -- then hope and imagination are just sentimental quirks of our species. And so is any talk about the sanctity of the human person, or human rights, or human dignity.

Here's problem four: *More and more often, we're unable to recognize and live real freedom.* Freedom is more than just an endless supply of options and choices. Choice for its own sake is just another form of idolatry. Freedom is the ability to see -- and the courage to *do* -- what is morally right. But if Americans stop believing that any absolute principles of right and wrong exist, then how can we even begin to discuss things like freedom, truth and the dignity of the human person in a common vocabulary? How can we agree on which rights take precedence, or who has responsibility for what obligations?

What we get in place of freedom is a kind of anarchy of conflicting appetites, pressure groups and personal agendas, refereed by the state and held together by just one fragile thread: the economy we all share . . . and money is rarely the best glue for brotherhood, or good will, or community. In fact our economy, more than anything else in American life today, teaches us to see *almost everything* as a commodity to be bought or sold.

Jeremy Rifkin, the author and social critic, once described modern culture – in the United States and elsewhere in the developed world -- as a “paid-for experience” based on the commodification of passion, ideals, relationships and even time.ⁱⁱ That’s a hard judgment, but too often it seems to be true. If we want freedom, we try to *buy* it by purchasing this car or that smartphone. If we want romance, we try to *buy* it by purchasing this vacation cruise or that hotel package.

And if want to skip the romance and get straight to the sex, we can *buy* that too. More than 11,000 new pornography films get produced in the United States every year. More than 116,000 internet searches for child pornography happen *every day*. Americans spend well over \$4 billion on pornography annually – more than on any major sport. That revenue includes the rental of more than 800 million porn videos. But it *doesn’t* include the ocean of free pornography anyone can find online.ⁱⁱⁱ

The results are predictable. Pornography wrecks thousands of marriages and families *every year*. It ruins the vocations of thousands of rabbis, priests and ministers *every year*. It infantilizes our ideas about sex; it cripples our imagination as a people; and it makes permanence and selflessness more and more difficult to secure in relations between men and women. Nonetheless, in a sense, pornography is the perfect proof of Rifkin’s observation about modern culture. Pornography reduces even the most intimate dimension of the human person to a product available for purchase.

My point is this: The more our economy misuses the language of our desires, dreams and ideals to sell products, to create new hungers and to commodify life . . . then the darker our appetites grow, and the more mixed up our dreams and ideals become. We feed our spiritual longings with material things, and we end up starving morally. We confuse ourselves to a point where we no longer know what real love, real intimacy, honest work, personal maturity, freedom, virtue, duty, family -- and even a meaningful life itself -- look like. We’re left with a chronic aching for more; more of everything and anything, except the one thing that matters: God. We end up cocooned in unreality; a Fantasyland of our own making.

This is the culture we’re called to change in a “new evangelization.” And here’s what that means.

All evangelization begins with two questions: *Why* should we do it? And *how* should we do it? The “why” has two very obvious answers: First, Jesus commands it in Mt 28:19-20: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you . . .” We can’t call ourselves his disciples and not be missionaries. We’re hardwired into the mission of Jesus Christ by virtue of our baptism. We need to be active witnesses of our faith, or we’re lying

to ourselves when we claim to be Catholic. Second, despite all the distractions and comforts that surround us in American culture, the stakes involved in every human life are real. The blood and brutal suffering of Jesus on the cross were the cost required for our redemption. Christ bought us at a very high price. We needed to be saved *from* something terrible. We needed to be ransomed *from* an Evil One bent on our destruction. Which means that evil is more than just a metaphor; more than just the sum of our human moral or psychological deficiencies. Evil is something real and conscious and murderous.

Baptism makes us disciples of Jesus Christ. It involves us in a struggle for the soul of the world. As we've already seen, the world today makes it very easy to delude ourselves. The natural and social sciences have weakened man's ability to believe in unseen things by exalting the material world and *implying* that human knowledge alone can explain reality – but without actually disproving anything about God or the supernatural. Modern unbelief is vigorous, confident and also a very clever cheat.

Yet people still suffer and die. And because they suffer and die, they hunger ultimately for a higher, comprehensive meaning to their lives. Which means they still can be, and still need to be, reached by the Word of God. Eternity is real, and the content of eternity for every human person depends on knowing and loving God. So as disciples of Jesus Christ, we need to be as vigorous and confident as those who oppose Jesus Christ.

So much for the “why” of evangelization. The “how” of a new evangelization, or *any* evangelization, needs to begin with our own repentance and conversion. That hasn't changed since St. Paul walked the roads of Asia Minor. We can't give what we don't have. As individuals, we control very little in life; but we do control what we do with our hearts. We can at least make ourselves available to God as his agents. Personal conversion is the essential first step of real discipleship. It immediately affects the people around us.

The “how” of evangelization also means trying to understand the future shape of our culture, a shape that's emerging even as we meet here today.

The future belongs to the young. And what this future may hold is worth some concern. Christian Smith, Notre Dame's distinguished social researcher, suggests that – already, today -- the *de facto* dominant religion among American teenagers is something he calls “moralistic therapeutic deism.”^{iv} He frames the creed of the new religion in this way:

First, a God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth. Second, God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other as taught in the Bible and most world religions. Third, the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. Fourth, God doesn't need to be involved in one's life except when he's needed to fix a problem. And fifth, good people go to heaven when they die.

Since teen religion largely derives from the world of adult religion, especially parental religion, it flows naturally from what the parents of these teens actually practice. At the everyday level, old patterns of religious faith among many adults have faded into a kind of vague “spirituality.” This ambiguity then shapes the world into which American adolescents are socialized.

For many young people, the moralistic part of “moralistic therapeutic deism” simply means being pleasant and responsible, working on “self-improvement,” taking care of one’s health and doing one’s best to succeed. “Therapeutic” means focusing on feeling good and happy, being secure and at peace. It’s about subjective well-being and getting along amiably with other persons. And “deism” means that God exists – he created our world – but he’s not particularly involved in our affairs, especially when we don’t want him around. He’s available to meet *our* needs. He’s not demanding on us, but we can be demanding on him.

Obviously very little of this has anything to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And that’s a problem. Morality is not simply a matter of “self-improvement.” The goal of feeling good and happy, secure and at peace, is not the faith of the martyrs. Genuine charity demands much more than just getting along amiably with others. And God is not our butler. We need to make ourselves available to God before we can reasonably ask God to be available to us.

In practice, American society now breeds a kind of radical self-focus and practical atheism – not by refuting faith in God, but by rendering God irrelevant to people’s needs and urgencies of the moment. As Christopher Lasch wrote in *The Culture of Narcissism*, consumer culture tends to create weak personalities dependent on group behavior and approval, and therefore more susceptible to advertising and product consumption.^v The natural and social sciences replace the clergy as a source of guidance and meaning. And social media and mass entertainment abolish solitude and personal reflection.

So in an age of massive self-absorption, real individuality and self-mastery are actually withering. Why? Because the communities that root and shape an individual in distinctive moral codes and histories – in other words, our families, synagogues, Churches and fraternal organizations – can’t compete with the noise of consumer society.

As a result, many self-described Christians *don’t* know Jesus Christ, have *never* met him, and feel no need to change. They don’t know the Word of God. They don’t love the Church as Pope John XXIII loved her – in other words, as a mother and teacher. And they don’t like to be told that they’re on the wrong path.

But they are. The Christian faith is not simply a habit. It’s not a useful moral code. It’s not an exercise in nostalgia. It’s a restlessness, a consuming fire in the heart to experience the love of Jesus Christ and then share it with others -- *or it’s nothing at all*. Mastering the new social and demographic data that describe today’s world, and the new communications tools to reach it, are vitally important for the Church. But nothing can be accomplished if we lack faith and zeal ourselves.

We – and that means you and I -- are the means God uses to change the world. The material tools are secondary. People, *not* things, are decisive -- which means that changing our culture begins here, right now, in each one of our hearts. Jesus revolutionized all of human history starting with 12 simple men. God already did it once. And God can do it again, but it begins with us.

In the second book of *The Life of St. Francis* by Thomas of Celano we read this description of the 13th century man who sought to live the Gospel without gloss or compromise, and who inspires our current Holy Father so powerfully:

“In these last times, a new evangelist, like one of the rivers of paradise, has poured out the streams of the Gospel in a holy flood over the whole world. [St. Francis] preached the way of the Son of God and the teaching of truth in his deeds. In him and through him an unexpected joy and a holy newness came into the world. A shoot of the ancient religion suddenly renewed the old and decrepit. A new spirit was placed in the hearts of the elect, and a holy anointing has been poured out in their midst” (89).

Elsewhere Thomas of Celano writes:

“The brothers who lived with [St. Francis] knew that daily, constantly, talk of Jesus was always on his lips. He was always with Jesus: Jesus in his heart, Jesus in his mouth, Jesus in his ears, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in his hands. He bore Jesus always in his whole body . . . Often as he walked along a road, thinking and singing of Jesus, he would forget his destination and start inviting all the elements to praise Jesus” (115).

The heart of every new work of evangelization is this kind of ardor; a simple, passionate faith that can only come from seeking out and giving ourselves entirely to Jesus Christ, no matter what the cost. It’s fitting that Francis of Assisi is the patron saint of Colorado, and that our new Holy Father took the name of Francis. Just as St. Francis was raised up in his time to preach the Gospel with new passion in new kinds of ways, so God asks all of us here today to follow the same path, with the same unshakeable faith, to preach Jesus Christ by word and deed in our families, our friendships, our business dealings and in every corner of daily life.

The Word of God remains young and alive only to the degree that you and I live it zealously ourselves and share it generously with others. If we do that one decisive thing, God will take care of the rest. God will make all things new. The irony, the glory and the joy of faith in Jesus Christ is that the more we give it away to others, the stronger it grows and the more we have for ourselves to feed our own hearts.

George Bernard Shaw once said that “When I was young, I observed that nine out of every ten things I did were failures, so I did ten times more work.” Shaw was never a friend of Christianity, but that just makes me happier to borrow his words. Young or old, we need to live our faith as St. Francis did -- all in, 100 percent, holding nothing back, with charity, endurance, passion and hope. That kind of faith changes lives and remakes the world.

Francis heard the Gospel, and believed, and acted on it. Today, here, beginning *now*, God calls us to the privilege of doing the same.

ⁱ The New York Times article referenced the study by Kruger, J. M., and Dunning, D., “Unskilled and unaware of it: How difficulties in recognizing one’s own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77, 1121-1134; 1999

ⁱⁱ See Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism, Where All of Life is a Paid-For Experience*, Tarcher, New York, 2001

ⁱⁱⁱ See Mary Eberstadt and Mary Anne Layden, *The Social Costs of Pornography: A Statement of Findings and Recommendations*, The Witherspoon Institute, Princeton, NJ, 2010

^{iv} See Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005

^v See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1979