

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC STUDENTS ASSOCIATION  
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## THE FALL OF THE CHRISTIAN WEST

### Introduction

First of all, I wish to thank the Australian Catholic Students Association for the invitation to speak with you about the crisis of Christian culture in our time. The title of my presentation describes an objective situation which we must acknowledge, but with hope of transforming it. When Mr. Xavier O’Kane, your former National President, in November of 2009, invited me to speak to you, I learned that part of the mission of the Australian Catholic Students Association is “supporting and encouraging Catholic students in their spiritual, intellectual, pastoral, and human development of their faith, in seeking to build a Catholic culture to live in truth and charity.”<sup>1</sup> For that reason, I wanted to honor the invitation. It is my hope, in my own small way, to offer you, as individuals and as an association, support and encouragement in building a Catholic culture which indeed, by its very nature, will reverse the decline of Christian culture in the West.

I thank also His Eminence Cardinal George Pell, Archbishop of Sydney, for his warm and gracious hospitality in welcoming me to Sydney on my first visit to Australia, which, I hope, will not be my last. Before accepting Mr. O’Kane’s invitation, I clearly sought first the counsel of His Eminence who gave me every good encouragement. I am pleased to have the occasion to express publicly my deepest esteem and gratitude for his leadership in the work of the transformation of Christian culture, the work of the new evangelization, in Australia and throughout the Christian West. He is not only, as the title of an excellent biography declares, “Defender of the Faith Down Under,” but also, true to his office of Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church, a defender of the faith in the universal Church. To illustrate the importance of the leadership given by Cardinal Pell, I point out the biography in question has its proper edition in the United States of America, which was published two years after the original Australian edition and which I have had the pleasure to study.<sup>2</sup>

In my presentation tonight, I want to reflect with you on the crisis of Christian culture

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.catholicstudents.org.au/aboutus.php?page=Mission>.

in the West and our call to build anew a strong Catholic culture, in fidelity to our vocation to give witness to Christ and, therefore, to be martyrs for the faith. First, I will set the context of the living of our Christian vocation in the present time, as presented to us by Pope Benedict XVI who urges us to study again, in particular, the moral teaching of His saintly predecessor, the Venerable, soon to be Blessed, Pope John Paul II. I will, then, present briefly the teaching of Pope John Paul II on holiness of life as the program of the new evangelization. Drawing upon the teaching of both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, I will give particular attention to the witness to the truth regarding human sexuality, as fundamental to holiness of life, and to the question of conscience as the irreplaceable and secure guide in the pursuit of holiness of life. The final part of my presentation is a reflection on witness as martyrdom and the various forms which it takes.

### **The Present Context: Decline of the Christian West**

Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2010 Christmas Address to the College of Cardinals, the Roman Curia and the Governorate of Vatican City State, spoke clearly and strongly about the profoundly disordered moral state in which our world finds itself, today. He spoke about the grave evils of our time, for example, the sexual abuse of minors by the clergy, the marketing of child pornography, sexual tourism, and the deadly abuse of drugs.

One also thinks of other most grievous moral evils of our time, for instance, the plague of procured abortion, the wholesale murder of the unborn in the womb, justified as the exercise of the so-called right of the mother to choose whether to bring to term the baby she has conceived. More and more, too, we face the abhorrent practices of the artificial generation of human life and its destruction, at the embryonic stage of development, which are justified as the means to find supposed cures for crippling or deadly diseases. I cannot fail to mention also the so-called “mercy killing” of those who have the first title to our care, our brothers and sisters who have grown weak through advanced years, grave illness or special needs, which is justified as respect for the quality of their lives. One necessarily thinks, too, of the ever advancing agenda of those who want to redefine marriage and family life to include the unnatural sexual union of two persons of the same sex, which is justified as tolerance of so-called alternative forms of human sexuality, as if there were a true form of

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Tess Livingstone, *George Pell: Defender of the Faith Down Under*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004.



human sexuality other than that intended by God, our Creator and Redeemer, as He has written it in our body and soul.

Regarding the grave evils which beset the world, in our day, Pope Benedict XVI declared that they are all signs of “the tyranny of mammon which perverts mankind” and that they result from “a fatal misunderstanding of freedom which actually undermines man’s freedom and ultimately destroys it.”<sup>3</sup> They are manifestations, to be sure, of a way of living, to use the words of the Venerable, soon to be Blessed, Pope John Paul II, “as if God did not exist.”<sup>4</sup>

They are a manifestation of sin at its root, which is pride, the pride of man who fails to recognize that all that he is and has comes from the hand of God Who has created us and has redeemed us, after the sin of our First Parents. They are a manifestation of the foolishness of seeking our freedom other than in the will of God and thus making ourselves slaves to creaturely realities. That foolishness manifests itself in a most distressing way in a culture of addictions, in which we seek our freedom and happiness in some creaturely reality and when we do not find them there, as indeed we never can, we, in our pride, instead of turning in obedience to God, enslave ourselves more and more to the same creature, for example, alcohol, food, sexual promiscuity or pornography, until the creature destroys us.

Pope Benedict XVI’s words in his Christmas Address of last year are redolent of the powerful pastoral concern which he expressed in his homily during the Mass for the Election of the Roman Pontiff, celebrated before the conclave during which he was elected to the See of Peter. He spoke of how the “the thought of many Christians” has been tossed about, in our time, by various “ideological currents,” observing that we are witnesses to the “human deception and the trickery that strives to entice people into error,” about which Saint Paul wrote in his *Letter to the Ephesians*.<sup>5</sup> He noted that, in our time, those who live according to “a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church” are viewed as extremists, while relativism, that is, “letting oneself be ‘tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine,’” is

<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Benedict XVI’s Christmas greeting to the College of Cardinals, the Roman Curia and the Governorate: Resolved in faith and in doing good,” *L’Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English*, 22-29 December 2010, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, “On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World,” 30 December 1988, Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988, no. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Mass for the Election of the Roman Pontiff: Monday, 18 April: Homily by the Cardinal who became Pope,” *L’Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English*, 20 April 2005, p. 3. Cf. *Eph* 4:14.

extolled.<sup>6</sup> Regarding the source of the grave moral evils of our time, he concluded: “We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.”<sup>7</sup>

### **The Ideological Foundations of the Decline**

In his 2010 Christmas Address, reflecting on the grave evils which are destroying us as individuals and as a society, and which have generated a culture marked predominantly by violence and death, the Holy Father reminded us that, if we, with the help of God’s grace, are to overcome the grave evils of our time, “we must turn our attention to their ideological foundations.”<sup>8</sup> He then identified directly and unequivocally the ideology which fosters these evils: a perversion of *ethos*, of the moral norm, which has even entered into the thinking of some theologians in the Church.

Referring to one of the more shocking manifestations of the ideology, namely, the so-called moral position that the sexual abuse of children by adults is actually good for the children and for the adults, he declared:

It was maintained – even within the realm of Catholic theology – that there is no such thing as evil in itself or good in itself. There is only a “better than” and a “worse than”. Nothing is good or bad in itself. Everything depends on the circumstances and on the end in view. Anything can be good or also bad, depending upon purposes and circumstances. Morality is replaced by a calculus of consequences, and in the process it ceases to exist.<sup>9</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI describes a moral relativism, called proportionalism or consequentialism in contemporary moral theology, which has generated profound confusion and outright error regarding the most fundamental truths of the moral law.<sup>10</sup> It has led to a situation in which morality itself indeed “ceases to exist.” If, therefore, the irreplaceable moral order, which is the way of our freedom and happiness, is to be restored we must address with clarity and steadfastness the error of moral relativism, proportionalism and consequentialism, which

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Benedict XVI’s Christmas greeting to the College of Cardinals, the Roman Curia and the Governorate,” p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, “On the Fundamentals of the Church’s Moral Teaching,” 6 August 1993, Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, no. 75.



permeates our culture and has also entered, as the Holy Father reminds us, into the Church.

To confront the ideology, Pope Benedict XVI has urged us to study anew the teaching of his predecessor, the Venerable, soon to be Blessed, Pope John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, “On the Fundamentals of the Church’s Moral Teaching.” In *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, “indicated with prophetic force, in the great rational tradition of Christian *ethos*, the essential and permanent foundations of moral action.”<sup>11</sup> Reminding us of the need to form our consciences, in accord with the moral teaching of the Church, our Holy Father also reminded us of “our responsibility to make these criteria [these moral foundations] audible and intelligible once more for people today as paths of true humanity, in the context of our paramount concern for mankind.”<sup>12</sup> In the exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI, we see the expression of the deepest pastoral charity of the Vicar of Christ on earth, charity, which like that of the Christ the Good Shepherd, knows no boundary and is unceasing.

### **Reason and Faith in the Knowledge of Objective Moral Principles**

Later, in the same Christmas Address, His Holiness recalled his “encounter with the world of culture in Westminster Hall,” during his pastoral visit to the United Kingdom, during which he reflected “on the proper place of religious belief within the political process.”<sup>13</sup> Taking inspiration from the example of Saint Thomas More, he addressed directly “the ethical foundations of civil discourse.”<sup>14</sup> As a service to culture, in general, he set forth the Catholic understanding of the matter with these words:

The central question at issue, then, is this: where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found? The Catholic tradition maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason, prescinding from the content of revelation. According to this understanding, the role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these norms, as if they could not be known by non-believers – still less to propose concrete political solutions, which would lie altogether outside the competence of religion – but

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<sup>11</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Benedict XVI’s Christmas greeting to the College of Cardinals, the Roman Curia and the Governorate,” p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Heart Speaks unto Heart: Pope Benedict XVI in the UK, The Complete Addresses and Homilies*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010, p. 49.

rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles.<sup>15</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI noted that the role of religion in public discourse “is not always welcomed,” for various reasons which can also include “distorted forms of religion, such as sectarianism and fundamentalism.”<sup>16</sup>

He observed, however, that such distortions do not justify the exclusion of religion from public discourse, for “reason too can fall prey to distortions, as when it is manipulated by ideology, or applied in a partial way that fails to take account of the dignity of the human person.”<sup>17</sup> What remains necessary and true is the right relationship of faith and reason. The Holy Father concludes:

This is why I would suggest that the world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilization.”<sup>18</sup>

Religion, he continued, “is not a problem for legislators to solve, but a vital contributor to the national conversation.”<sup>19</sup> In the light of the irreplaceable role of religion in public life, the Holy Father expressed his “concern at the increasing marginalization of religion, particularly of Christianity, that is taking place in some quarters, even in nations which place a great emphasis on tolerance.”<sup>20</sup>

He then gives a telling description of some of the more troubling manifestations of the effort to alienate religion from the public forum. His words which I now quote shed light on the absurdity and indeed moral perversity of a public order which fails to respect the proper role of religion:

There are those who would advocate that the voice of religion be silenced, or at least relegated to the purely private sphere. There are those who argue that the public celebration of festivals such as Christmas should be discouraged, in the questionable belief that it might somehow offend those of other religions

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.



or none. And there are those who argue – paradoxically with the intention of eliminating discrimination – that Christians in public roles should be required at times to act against their conscience. These are worrying signs of a failure to appreciate not only the rights of believers to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, but also the legitimate role of religion in the public square.<sup>21</sup>

Pope Benedict concluded with an invitation to safeguard and foster the right relationship of faith and reason, which is essential to the pursuit of the common good, of the good of society. In the 2010 Christmas Address, he concluded his reference to his speech in Westminster Hall with these urgent words:

This fundamental [moral] consensus derived from the Christian heritage is at risk wherever its place, the place of moral reasoning, is taken by the purely instrumental rationality of which I spoke earlier. In reality, this makes reason blind to what is essential. To resist this eclipse of reason and to preserve its capacity for seeing the essential, for seeing God and man, for seeing what is good and what is true, is the common interest that must unite all people of good will. The very future of the world is at stake.<sup>22</sup>

There can be no question of the urgency with which Pope Benedict XVI is calling us to reverse the decline of western Christian culture by engaging public discourse with the fundamental truths of the moral law, as taught to us by reason and our Catholic faith.

In his Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI addressed the same concern precisely in terms of human development, indicating the harm done to society, in general, when religion is excluded from public discourse. He described the deleterious societal effect of two extremes, the exclusion of religion and religious fundamentalism, in these words:

The exclusion of religion from the public square – and, at the other extreme, religious fundamentalism – hinders an encounter between persons and their collaboration for the progress of humanity. Public life is sapped of its motivation and politics takes on a domineering and aggressive character.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Benedict XVI’s Christmas greeting to the College of Cardinals, the Roman Curia and the Governorate: resolved in faith and in doing good,” p. 13.

Human rights risk being ignored either because they are robbed of their transcendent foundation or because personal freedom is not acknowledged. Secularism and fundamentalism exclude the possibility of fruitful dialogue and effective cooperation between reason and religious faith. *Reason always stands in need of being purified by faith*: this also holds true for political reason, which must not consider itself omnipotent. For its part, *religion always needs to be purified by reason* in order to show its authentically human face. Any breach in this dialogue comes only at an enormous price to human development.<sup>23</sup>

To the degree that we restore respect for the essential relationship between faith and reason, to that degree we are filled with hope for the future of a culture which, otherwise, can only be in decline.

For us, as members of the Catholic Church, we discover the true relationship between faith and reason, the true concept of *ethos*, of the moral norm, in Jesus Christ, in a personal relationship with Him as He comes to meet us and to make us ever more one with Him in His Mystical Body, the Church. In Jesus Christ, God the Son made man, heaven has come to earth to dispel the darkness of error and sin, and to fill our souls with the light of truth and goodness. If we live in Christ, in the union of our hearts with His Most Sacred Heart, when our brothers and sisters, lost in the unreal world of moral relativism and, therefore, tempted to despair, encounter us, they find direction for their lives and the hope for which they are looking and longing. Living in Jesus Christ, living according to the truth which He alone teaches us in His Church, we become light to dispel the confusion and error which lead to the many and so grave moral evils of our time, and to inspire a life lived in accord with the truth and, therefore, marked by freedom and happiness.

### **Holiness of Life, the Program of the New Evangelization**

Addressing the challenge of Christian living in a totally secularized world, the Venerable, soon to be Blessed, Pope John Paul II called us to the new evangelization. The new evangelization means teaching the faith, celebrating the faith in the Sacraments and in their extension through prayer and devotion, and living the faith through the practice of the

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<sup>23</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, "On Integral Human Development in Charity and



virtues, as if for the first time, that is, with the engagement and energy of the first disciples, of the first apostles to our native place. Before the grave situation of the world today, we are, Pope John Paul II reminds us, like the first disciples who, after hearing Saint Peter's Pentecost discourse, asked him: "What must we do?"<sup>24</sup> Even as the first disciples faced a pagan world which had not even heard of our Lord Jesus Christ, so, we, too face a culture which is forgetful of God and hostile to His Law written upon every human heart.

Before the great challenge of our time, Pope John Paul cautioned us that we will not save ourselves and our world by discovering "some magic formula" or by "inventing a new programme."<sup>25</sup> In unmistakable terms, he declared:

No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: *I am with you*.<sup>26</sup>

He reminded us that the programme by which we are to address effectively the great spiritual challenges of our time is, in the end, Jesus Christ alive for us in the Church. He explained:

The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its center in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfillment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a program which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication.<sup>27</sup>

In short, the program leading to freedom and happiness is, for each of us, holiness of life.

The Venerable Pope John Paul II, in fact, cast the entire pastoral plan for the Church in terms of holiness. He explained himself thus:

In fact, to place pastoral planning under the heading of holiness is a choice filled with consequences. It implies the conviction that, since Baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of his Spirit, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethics and a shallow religiosity. To ask

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Truth," 29 June 2009, Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009, p. 109, no. 56.

<sup>24</sup> *Acts* 2:37.

<sup>25</sup> Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, "At the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000," 6 January 2001, Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001, no. 29.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 29.

catechumens: “Do you wish to be receive Baptism?” means at the same time to ask them: “Do you wish to become holy?” It means to set before them the radical nature of the Sermon on the Mount: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (*Mt 5:48*).<sup>28</sup>

Pope John Paul II continued, making reference to the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, reminding us that “this ideal of perfection must not be misunderstood as if it involved some kind of extraordinary existence, possible only for a few ‘uncommon heroes’ of holiness.”<sup>29</sup>

Pope John Paul II taught us the extraordinary nature of our ordinary life, because it is lived in Christ and, therefore, produces in us the incomparable beauty of holiness. He declared:

The ways of holiness are many, according to the vocation of each individual. I thank the Lord that in these years he has enabled me to beatify and canonize a large number of Christians, and among them many lay people who attained holiness in the most ordinary circumstances of life. The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this *high standard of ordinary Christian living*: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction.<sup>30</sup>

Seeing in us the daily conversion of life by which we strive to meet the high standard of holiness, our brothers and sisters will discover the great mystery of their own ordinary life in which God daily showers upon them his ceaseless and immeasurable love.

Making pilgrimage to the ancient shrine of Saint James the Greater at Compostela in Spain, in November of last year, Pope Benedict XVI urged Europeans to recognize the great gift of God’s love in the world, in Jesus Christ, and to follow Him in holiness of life. His words to the faithful of Europe, who have grown so forgetful of God and even hostile to His Law, apply also to other dechristianized nations. His words are further illuminated by the context of his pilgrimage, for the very purpose of a pilgrimage is to open our eyes to the great mystery of God’s love in our lives, that is, to open our eyes to see the extraordinary nature of ordinary living. Let us listen to the words of Pope Benedict XVI:

God is the origin of our being and the foundation and apex of our freedom, not

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 29.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 31.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 31.



its opponent. How can mortal man build a firm foundation and how can the sinner be reconciled with himself? How can it be that there is public silence with regard to the first and essential reality of human life? How can what is most decisive in life be confined to the purely private sphere or banished to the shadows? We cannot live in darkness, without seeing the light of the sun. How is it then that God, who is the light of every mind, the power of every will and the magnet of every heart, be denied the right to propose the light that dissipates all darkness? This is why we need to hear God once again under the skies of Europe; may this holy word not be spoken in vain, and may it not be put at the service of purposes other than its own. It needs to be spoken in a holy way. And we must hear it in this way in ordinary life, in the silence of work, in brotherly love and in the difficulties that the years bring on.<sup>31</sup>

The words of our Holy Father make clear the inherent dynamism of the life of the Holy Spirit within us, leading us to give witness to mystery of God's love in our lives and so to convert our own lives more fully to Christ and to transform our world.

### **Holiness of Life and the Fundamental Witness to the Truth about Human Sexuality**

Here, it is important to make clear the relationship between the practice of the virtues of purity, chastity and modesty, that is the living of the truth regarding human sexuality and human life, and the practice of justice. The respect for human life is related essentially to the respect for the integrity of marriage and the family. The attack on the innocent and defenseless life of the unborn, for example, has its origin in an erroneous view of human sexuality, which attempts to eliminate, by mechanical or chemical means, the essentially procreative nature of the conjugal act. The error maintains that the artificially altered act retains its integrity. The claim is that the act remains unitive or loving, even though the procreative nature of the act has been radically violated. In fact, it is not unitive, for one or both of the partners withholds an essential part of the gift of self, which is the essence of the conjugal union. The so-called "contraceptive mentality" is essentially anti-life. Many forms of what is called contraception are, in fact, abortifacient, that is, they destroy a life which has

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 31.

<sup>31</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Compostelian Jubilee Year Mass at Santiago de Compostela: God resounds anew under the skies of Europe," *L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English*, 10 November 2010, pp. 5 and 8.

already been conceived, has already begun.

The manipulation of the conjugal act, as the Servant of God Pope Paul VI courageously observed, has led to many forms of violence to marriage and family life.<sup>32</sup> Through the spread of the contraceptive mentality, especially among the young, human sexuality is no longer seen as the gift of God, which draws a man and a woman together, in a bond of lifelong and faithful love, crowned by the gift of new human life, but, rather, as a tool for personal gratification. Once sexual union is no longer seen to be, by its very nature, procreative, human sexuality is abused in ways that are profoundly harmful and indeed destructive of individuals and of society itself. One has only to think of the devastation which is daily wrought in our world by the multi-billion dollar industry of pornography. Fundamental to the transformation of western culture is the proclamation of the truth about the conjugal union, in its fullness, and the correction of the contraceptive thinking which fears life, which fears procreation.

It is instructive to note that Pope Benedict XVI, in his Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, makes special reference to Pope Paul VI's Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae*, underscoring its importance "for delineating the *fully human meaning of the development that the Church proposes*."<sup>33</sup> Pope Benedict XVI makes clear that the teaching in *Humanae Vitae* is not simply a matter of "individual morality," declaring:

*Humanae vitae* indicates the *strong links between life ethics and social ethics*, ushering in a new area of magisterial teaching that has gradually been articulated in a series of documents, most recently John Paul II's Encyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae*.<sup>34</sup>

His Holiness reminds us of the essential part which a right understanding of our sexuality has in true human development.

In treating the whole question of procreation, Pope Benedict XVI underscores the critical nature of the right understanding of human sexuality, marriage and the family. He writes:

The Church, in her concern for man's authentic development, urges him to have full respect for human goods in the exercise of his sexuality. It cannot be

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* "On the Proper Regulation of the Propagation of Offspring," 25 July 1968, Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1968, no. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 15.



reduced merely to pleasure or entertainment, nor can sex education be reduced to technical instruction aimed solely at protecting the interested parties from possible disease or the “risk” of procreation. This would be to impoverish and disregard the deeper meaning of sexuality, a meaning which needs to be acknowledged and responsibly appropriated not only by individuals but also by the community.<sup>35</sup>

The restoration of the respect for the integrity of the conjugal act is essential to the future of western culture, the advancement of a culture of life. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, it is necessary “once more to hold up to future generations the beauty of marriage and the family, and the fact that these institutions correspond to the deepest needs and dignity of the person.”<sup>36</sup> Correspondingly, he notes that “States are called to *enact policies promoting the centrality and integrity of the family* founded on marriage between a man and a woman, the primary vital cell of society, and to assume responsibility for its economic and fiscal needs, while respecting its essentially relational character.”<sup>37</sup>

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that “[s]o-called *moral permissiveness* rests on an erroneous conception of human freedom” and that “the necessary precondition for the development of true freedom is to let oneself be educated in the moral law.”<sup>38</sup> As is clear, from the above considerations, individual freedom and the freedom of society, in general, depends upon a fundamental education in the truth about human sexuality and the exercise of that truth in a pure and chaste life. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* goes on to observe: “Those in charge of education can reasonably be expected to give young people instruction respectful of the truth, the qualities of the heart, and the moral and spiritual dignity of man.”<sup>39</sup> For the Christian, it is education in holiness of life at its very foundation, in the respect owed to the inviolable dignity of self, body and soul, and of others as self.

### **Conscience, the Infallible Guide to Holiness of Life**

If we are to seek holiness of life, to live more totally and faithfully for Christ, namely, to give our lives to Christ, without any reserve, our hearts must seek their wisdom and

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 15.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 44.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 44.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 44.

<sup>38</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2526.

strength in the glorious pierced Heart of Jesus; our conscience must be trained to listen to God's voice alone and to reject what would weaken or compromise, in any way, our witness to the truth in which He alone instructs us through the Church. Through our daily prayer and devotion, and through our study of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and of the Papal Magisterium, our conscience is formed according to the will of God, His law which is life for us.

It is the conscience, the voice of God, speaking to our souls, which is, in the words of the Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, "the aboriginal Vicar of Christ."<sup>40</sup> As such, the conscience is ever attuned to Christ Himself Who instructs and informs it through His Vicar, the Roman Pontiff, and the Bishops in communion with the Roman Pontiff. The Blessed Cardinal Newman observed that conscience "is a messenger of him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by his representatives."<sup>41</sup>

Today, we must be attentive to a false notion of conscience, which would actually use the conscience to justify sinful acts, the betrayal of our call to holiness. In the earlier-mentioned 2010 Christmas Address, Pope Benedict reflected, at some length, on the notion of conscience in the writings of Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, contrasting it with a false notion of conscience, which is pervasive in our time.

The Holy Father described the difference of the Church's understanding of conscience, as faithfully and brilliantly taught by the Blessed Cardinal Newman, with these words:

In modern thinking, the word "conscience" signifies that for moral and religious questions, it is the subjective dimension, the individual, that constitutes the final authority for decision. The world is divided into the realms of the objective and the subjective. To the objective realm belong things that can be calculated and verified by experiment. Religion and morals fall outside the scope of these methods and are therefore considered to lie within the subjective realm. Here, it is said, there are in the final analysis no objective criteria. The ultimate instance that can decide here is therefore the

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 2526.

<sup>40</sup> John Henry Cardinal Newman, "Letter to the Duke of Norfolk," V, in *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching II*, London: Longmans Green, 1885, p. 248. Quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1778.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.



subject alone, and precisely this is what the word “conscience” expresses: in this realm only the individual, with his intuitions and experiences, can decide. Newman’s understanding of conscience is diametrically opposed to this. For him, “conscience” means man’s capacity for truth: the capacity to recognize precisely in the decision-making areas of his life – religion and morals – a truth, *the* truth. At the same time, conscience – man’s capacity to recognize truth – thereby imposes on him the obligation to set out along the path towards truth, to seek it and to submit to it wherever he finds it. Conscience is both capacity for truth and obedience to the truth which manifests itself to anyone who seeks it with an open heart.<sup>42</sup>

Conscience, therefore, does not set each of us apart as an arbiter of what is right and good, but unites us in the pursuit of the one truth, ultimately Our Lord Jesus Christ Who is the only arbiter of the right and good, so that our thoughts, words and actions put that truth into practice.

In the same Christmas discourse, Pope Benedict XVI clarified an often misunderstood passage of Blessed Cardinal Newman used in fact to promote the erroneous subjective notion of conscience. Our Holy Father observed:

In support of the claim that Newman’s concept of conscience matched the modern subjective understanding, people often quote a letter in which he said – should he have to propose a toast – that he would drink first to conscience and then to the Pope. But in this statement, “conscience” does not signify the ultimately binding quality of subjective intuition. It is an expression of the accessibility and the binding force of truth: on this its primacy is based. The second toast can be addressed to the Pope because it is his task to demand obedience to the truth.<sup>43</sup>

In other words, there can never be a contrast between what the conscience demands of us and what the truth of the faith, as enunciated by the Holy Father, demands of us. The conscience, in fact, is drawing us into an ever deeper understanding of the truth and adherence to it in our thoughts, words and actions.

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<sup>42</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Benedict XVI’s Christmas greeting to the College of Cardinals, the Roman Curia and the Governorate,” p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

### **Holiness of Life and Martyrdom for the Faith**

The witness of holiness of life is, in fact, martyrdom, in one form or another. In the words of the Holy Scriptures, it is dying to self, in order to live for Christ.<sup>44</sup> It is what the Servant of God Father John A. Hardon, S.J., called “the palpable fact of every true follower of Christ.”<sup>45</sup> When we hear the word, martyrdom, we tend to think exclusively of those who have given their lifeblood out of faithful love of Christ, who have been killed because of hatred of Christ and of the Christian faith. Red martyrs or martyrs of blood give the highest form of witness and are our models in giving daily witness to our love of Christ, even though we may not be asked to pour out our lifeblood. Through their martyrdom, they also win for us so many graces for our daily living. In the words of the Servant of God Father Hardon, “[t]hrough their sufferings we are all made richer, as through their merits the whole Church becomes more holy.”<sup>46</sup>

Saint Thomas More, husband and father, and high-ranking member of the government of King Henry VIII, was a martyr for the faith in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the face of imprisonment and execution, he steadfastly listened to the voice of God, rather the voices of men who insisted that he act according to a human way of thinking, alienated from the wisdom of God, from the moral law. At his trial on July 1, 1535, Saint Thomas More held firmly to the living Tradition of the Church, which forbade him, in conscience, to acknowledge King Henry VIII with the title of Supreme Head of the Church. When, during the trial, the Chancellor rebuked him, citing the acceptance of the title by so many bishops and nobles of the land, Thomas More replied: “My lord, for one bishop of your opinion I have a hundred saints of mine; and for one parliament of yours, and God knows of what kind, I have all the General Councils for 1,000 years, ....”<sup>47</sup>

When the Duke of Norfolk accused him of malice in his response, Thomas More replied: “What I say is necessary for discharge of my conscience and satisfaction of my soul, and to this I call God to witness, the sole Searcher of human hearts.”<sup>48</sup> Thomas More was condemned to death. The reason for his death sentence was hatred of the Catholic faith and,

<sup>44</sup> Cf. 2 Cor 5:15; and 1 Pet 2:24.

<sup>45</sup> John A. Hardon, S.J., *Holiness in the Church*, Bardstown: Eternal Life, 2000, p. 31.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>47</sup> Gerard B. Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith, eds. *A Thomas More Source Book*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004, p. 354.



specifically, of its teaching on the primacy of Saint Peter as the Vicar of Christ on earth. Rightly, Thomas More declared on the scaffold, as he was about to be beheaded: "I die the king's good servant, and God's first."<sup>49</sup> The Saint served his king well by obeying God Who revealed His truth to him through Thomas More's conscience, instructed and informed by the example of the saints of the Church and by her Magisterium. So, too, we only serve well our brothers and sisters, when we first serve God with fidelity and without compromise, following His voice, our conscience.

During his pastoral visit to the United Kingdom in September of last year, in his earlier mentioned address at Westminster Hall, Pope Benedict XVI reflected on the questions which Saint Thomas More, Martyr, continues to raise to us who are one with him in the Church, Militant, Suffering and Triumphant. He explained:

And yet the fundamental questions at stake in Thomas More's trial continue to present themselves in ever-changing terms as new social conditions emerge. Each generation, as it seeks to advance the common good, must ask anew: what are the requirements that governments may reasonably impose upon citizens, and how far do they extend? By appeal to what authority can moral dilemmas be resolved? These questions take us directly to the ethical foundations of civil discourse. If the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are themselves determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident – herein lies the real challenge for democracy.<sup>50</sup>

Surely, we face, in our time, a similar challenge to our faith as did Saint Thomas More. In the face of the ever advancing anti-life and anti-family agenda of many who are in power in our culture, we pray, through the intercession of Saint Thomas More, that we may be faithful and courageous in loving Christ in every brother and sister, especially those in most need, those whom our Lord called "the least" of His brethren."<sup>51</sup>

There is also the martyrdom of persecution. Father Hardon explains:

Not all the faithful who suffer for Christ also die for Christ. Opposition to the

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 354.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>50</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Heart Speaks Unto Heart: Pope Benedict XVI in the UK: The Complete Addresses and Homilies*, p. 50.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Mt 25:40 and 45.

Christian faith and way of life does not always end in violent death for the persecuted victims. Consequently it is well to distinguish between what may be called martyrdom of blood and martyrdom of opposition which is bloodless indeed but no less – and sometimes more – painful to endure.<sup>52</sup>

We think, for example, of the persecution of our brothers and sisters in China or in some Islamic societies. While they seem to be free, in the sense that they are not imprisoned, “they are, in effect, deprived of every human liberty to practice their religion and to serve Christ according to their faith.”<sup>53</sup>

If we reflect, with some depth, on the martyrdom of opposition, we recognize in certain so-called free nations and in some of their policies and laws an opposition to the Christian’s adherence to the natural moral law. Think, for instance, of the pharmacist who is compelled by the civil courts to fill prescriptions for abortifacient drugs, or the priest who is charged by civil authorities with the use of so-called “hate language” because he teaches the truth about the intrinsic evil of homosexual acts. Not without reason, there is greater and greater fear that the Church will be unable to carry out her educational, health-care and charitable works in certain nations because the civil law requires that such Church works cooperate in acts which are always and every wrong.

The Servant of God Father Hardon cites a passage from the *Book of Wisdom*, regarding how the godless persecute the virtuous who are “a standing rebuke to them.”<sup>54</sup> The passage presents the way of thinking of those who oppose the way of faith, with these words:

Let us oppress the righteous poor man; let us not spare the widow, nor regard the gray hairs of the aged. But let our might be our law of right, for what is weak proves itself to be useless. Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training. He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord. He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange.<sup>55</sup>

When our upholding of the moral law, as we must uphold it, brings forth resistance, we must

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<sup>52</sup> John A. Hardon, S.J., *Holiness in the Church*, p. 33.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.



recall that we, alive in Christ, are a sign of contradiction to the world's way of thinking. Our lives are a rebuke of the violation of the moral law, not for the sake of rebuking, but for the sake of the salvation of our world.<sup>56</sup> We must also remember that our witness, like the witness of the martyrs, will work a transformation in our society, will redound ultimately to the safeguarding and fostering of all human life.

Finally, there is the martyrdom of witness, the most common form of martyrdom, the martyrdom which is inherent to the Christian life. It can take the form of suffering personal hostility or simply indifference in giving the witness of holiness of life. The Servant of God Father Hardon describes the martyrdom of witness with these words:

All that we have seen about the martyrdom by violence applies here too, but the method of opposition is different. Here the firm believer in the Church's teaching authority; the devoted servant of the papacy; the convinced pastor who insists on sound doctrine to his flock; the dedicated religious who want to remain faithful to their vows of authentic poverty, honest chastity and sincere obedience; the firm parents who are concerned about the religious and moral training of their children and are willing to sacrifice generously to build and care for a Christian family – natural or adopted – such persons will not be spared also active criticism and open opposition. But they must especially be ready to live in an atmosphere of coldness to their deepest beliefs.<sup>57</sup>

The hostility and the even more pervasive indifference to the beliefs we hold most dearly tempts us to discouragement and even to avoid the more public witness to our faith. But the martyrdom to which we are called and for which we are consecrated and fortified by the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, requires us to offer tirelessly our witness, confident that God will bring forth the good fruit. Given the breakdown in family life, the wholesale attack on innocent and defenseless human lives, and the violation of the integrity of the union of marriage in our society, the call to the martyrdom of witness is ever more urgent.

As Father Hardon understood, to a remarkable degree, a fundamental and essential form of witness is dedication to the sound teaching of the faith, the condition of the

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<sup>55</sup> *Wis* 2:10-15.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. *Lk* 2:34.

<sup>57</sup> John A. Hardon, S.J., *Holiness in the Church*, p. 37.

possibility of the love and service of the faith. For that reason, he devoted the last years of his life and his very last energies to the foundation and development of the Marian Catechist Apostolate for the sound spiritual and doctrinal formation of catechists. Before the great challenges of teaching the Catholic faith in our time, he urged catechists to remember the first disciples, the early Christians, who, with the help of God's grace, faithfully and efficaciously evangelized a pagan world, frequently at the cost of their lifeblood.

Coming to Australia, I cannot fail to mention, in this regard, the heroic example of Mother Mary MacKillop, canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on October 17<sup>th</sup> of last year. She provides for Catholics in Australia and throughout the world the example of total and tireless witness to the faith, in particular, through the fundamental apostolate of teaching the faith. In his homily, during the Mass of Canonization, Pope Benedict XVI recalled her dedication "as a young woman to the education of the poor in the difficult and demanding terrain or rural Australia, inspiring other women to join her in the first women's community of religious sisters of [your] country."<sup>58</sup> Recalling the "many challenges" which she faced, he reminded us that "her prayers to St Joseph and her unflagging devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to whom she dedicated her new congregation, gave this holy woman the graces needed to remain faithful to God and the Church."<sup>59</sup> May Saint Mary of the Cross MacKillop, Virgin, Foundress of the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, inspire you, young men and women of Australia, to be faithful and tireless witnesses to Christ, building anew, with the help of her prayers, the Christian culture of your beloved nation.

## Conclusion

Reflecting, at length, on the declining state of the Christian West and our response, in accord with the call to holiness of life and martyrdom for the faith, for the sake of our own salvation and the salvation of the world, we recognize that it is Christ Himself who makes it possible for us to pursue holiness, to be true martyrs. It is in following Him faithfully and without reserve that we bring the light of truth to our world. At the same time, He is with us always, as He promised, to sustain us by His grace, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Our reflection cannot conclude without underlining those extraordinary means by

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<sup>58</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Benedict XVI invites the faithful to follow example of six new Saints during their Canonization Mass: A celebration of Sainthood," *L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English*, 20 October 2010, p. 13.



which Christ comes to us in the Church, accompanies us along our life pilgrimage and sustains us in faithful and total witness, bringing us safely home to the Father. I mean the Sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and Penance. In the Holy Eucharist, Christ unites our hearts, as perfectly as is possible in this life, to His Most Sacred Heart. He nourishes the life of the Holy Spirit within us with the incomparable Food which is His true Body and Blood. The Holy Eucharist not only strengthens us spiritually to be true martyrs, but is the model of our martyrdom, pure and selfless love, without condition, “to the end.”<sup>60</sup>

The life of the martyr for the faith finds its center and source in the Eucharistic sacrifice, in Eucharistic adoration, and in all forms of Eucharistic devotion, especially visits to the Blessed Sacrament and Spiritual Communion throughout the day. Through Eucharistic devotion and all true devotion, we extend our communion with the Lord in the Eucharistic Sacrifice into every aspect of our lives at every moment of our lives.

The Sacrament of Penance renews the grace of our baptism and confirmation through a personal encounter with Christ for the confession and forgiveness of our sins. Frequent confession, including confession of devotion, is essential to our growth in the truth which is made known to us through our conscience. Essentially connected to it is our nightly examination of conscience and Act of Contrition, by which, day by day, we turn once again to Christ in our heart and prepare ourselves for the sacramental encounter with Him in Confession. The integrity and courage needed to be a martyr of witness in the world today demand the intimacy with Christ, which can only come through the daily examination of conscience and Act of Contrition, and the regular meeting with Him in the Sacrament of Penance.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is both our model and our great intercessor in living the martyrdom of witness, of persecution and of blood. She is one of us, she shares fully our human nature, but, by God’s favor, she was preserved from any stain of sin from the moment of her conception. She was from the first moment of her life and remains always totally for Christ. The Venerable Pope John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, reminds us of our Blessed Mother’s irreplaceable help to us in giving the witness which is martyrdom:

Mary shares our human condition, but in complete openness to the grace of God. Not having known sin, she is able to have compassion on every kind of

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

weakness. She understands sinful man and loves him with a Mother's love. Precisely for this reason she is on the side of truth and shares the Church's burden in recalling always and to everyone the demands of morality. Nor does she permit sinful man to be deceived by those who claim to love him by justifying his sin, for she knows that the sacrifice of Christ her Son would thus be emptied of its power. No absolution offered by beguiling doctrines, even in the areas of philosophy and theology, can make man truly happy: only the Cross and the glory of the Risen Christ can grant peace to his conscience and salvation to his life.<sup>61</sup>

May the Blessed Virgin Mary intercede for us that we may be true and faithful witnesses to Christ alive within each of us. And may we turn to her always, so that she may bring us to her Son with her maternal counsel, given to the wine stewards at the Wedding Feast of Cana: "Do whatever He tells you."<sup>62</sup> So may He transform our lives and our world. So may he confirm you, members of the Australian Catholic Students Association in your mission "to build a Catholic culture to live in truth and charity."<sup>63</sup>

Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke  
 Archbishop Emeritus of Saint Louis  
 Prefect of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura  
 22 February 2011 – Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. *Jn* 13:1

<sup>61</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 120.

<sup>62</sup> *Jn* 2:5.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. note 1.