

CALL National Conference 2011
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“Preserving Our Catholic Identity”¹

I have been asked to offer roughly 25 minutes of reflections on the topic of “preserving Our Catholic Identity”. Given the time constraints, and the size of the topic this means I will have to take some rather large and complex issues and present them in a summary fashion. So I will ask you to indulge me as I may make some claims that would benefit from a longer defense, but which I do not have the freedom to offer at this time. Perhaps the question and answer session can help a little if not later conversations.

I will do three things in these brief reflections this morning. First, I want to draw our attention to the wider problem of secularization in this country, and in the West as a whole, both as it affects Hispanic Catholics but also as it affects all Catholics. Second, I will address some of the sources of this secularization as it has been identified by many others including the last few Popes. Finally, I want to make the recommendations for our response to the challenge of secularization – or as we have put it here – preserving our Catholic Identity.

The Problem of Secularization

As a preliminary comment let me simply assert what perhaps everyone in this room already knows: that our Catholic identity, our better our commitment to Jesus Christ and his Church, is the most important issue in the universe for all of us as Latino leaders, but also for the whole human race. In other words, amidst the many challenges the Hispanic community faces in the areas of education, political representation, immigration, poverty, unemployment, language, and the like – the single most important question we have to ask is: are we remaining faithful to Jesus Christ? The rest follows from this. In other words, if we fail to secure and deepen our Catholic identity, nothing else will matter in the long run.

There is a temptation to see Catholic identity as one of many equivalent dimensions of Hispanic culture, along with say language, food, music, art and legal traditions. But the Catholic faith has been in the past and should continue be the root of these other cultural realities. Religion is the basis of culture. So when we talk about preserving our Catholic identity we are really talking not only about preserving some aspect of our way of life, but about safeguarding our happiness and fulfillment in this life and the next, for we know that were made by God, redeemed by Jesus Christ and are destined to be with Him in happiness forever.

So then, what of secularization? Although the data is somewhat dated, taken largely from surveys completed in 2008 and 2009, we see some trends among Hispanics.

¹ Much of this lecture is taken from Rev. Michael Keating, “Companions of Christ and the New Evangelization” Summer 2002 (unpublished).

According to ARIS the largest growing religious segment among Hispanics in the US is those who do not affiliate with any religion. In 2000 roughly 6% of Hispanics self-identified as having no religious affiliation. In 2008 this was 12%.

In 2009, a Pew study entitled “Between Two Worlds: How Young Latinos Come of Age in America,” statistics demonstrated that the older generation was more likely to identify as Catholic and to attend church services. The survey also found that the likelihood of attending services decreased in younger generations, especially in the second and third generations born in the United States.

Pew also asked why people are leaving the religion of their childhood. Of those raised Catholic and now affiliated, 71% said they just drifted away from religious practice. Of those who converted to Protestantism 54% said they just drifted away. 70% of those who joined became Protestant said they found a religion they likes more.

This slide away from Catholicism is magnified when we turn to the wider picture of the US as a whole. Again from another Pew study of 2008, claimed that the Catholic Church has lost roughly one third of its members over the last few decades, making one commentator claim that the second largest denomination in the United States is ex-Catholics. Recently Fordham University, in response to statistics such as these, held a forum entitled “Lost: 20 Somethings and the Church.” One sociologist reported that a significant decrease of young adult association with the church. According to his research, although many young Catholics reported that religion is very important to them, 8 of 10 hold that many religions can lead to eternal life and make a distinction between their catholic faith and the Catholic Church as an institution. Only 2 of 10 believe the Catholic Church is the true church.

The purpose of this brief summary is not depress us, as I will share later there are also some good signs, but simply to bring to the forefront the fact that secularization is a real force in this country, especially among our youth, and that we have a responsibility to do something about it. Our Catholic identity is not only being threatened, it is being destroyed. So the next question is why.

Sources of Secularization

Let me begin my comments with the opening sentence of a book by the Catholic historian Christopher Dawson. He writes: “During the last two centuries the human race has experienced the greatest changes that it has known since the beginnings of history.”² This insight, though startling, is not singular. Dawson is one of many scholars, including Popes, who have noted the radical transformation of life and the way we think about it in the last two centuries.

This transformation goes well beyond mere technological progress. We are talking about more than the fact that we have indoor plumbing, airplanes, computers and genetic engineering. The transformation has happened at the level of our most basic

² (Christopher Dawson, *The Gods of Revolution*, p.3)

social relationships – such as the family and the nature of marriage, work and recreation - and the transformation has happened at the level of our most basic assumptions about the world – the nature of knowledge, the understanding of a human person, the relationship between faith and reason.

When one tries to understand these changes one is struck by the rather startling fact that many of the changes are in direct opposition to a Christian view of world. In the words of Archbishop Chaput: “In practice, almost nothing of what we believe as Catholics is affirmed by our culture. Even the meaning of the words “human” and “person” are subject to debate. And other tenets of the Catholic worldview are aggressively repudiated or ignored.”³

What follows is a list of a few of the most important changes that pose a threat to our Catholic identity, especially when unidentified. The list is by no means exhaustive.

First, we live in an age in which all social relationships are in the process of dissolution. This has reached the point where even the most intimate relationships, those of the family and that of mother and the baby in her womb are under attack. The evidence for this in our divorce friendly culture is all too obvious. We also see the effects of the breakdown in family, most notably in this country, in the rising incidents of generational poverty, dropout rates and substance abuse. One can point to the emphasis in the United States on the cult of individualism and the increasing bureaucratization of social life, which emphasizes utility and efficiency over human relationships. One can identify other sources as well, but what ought to be noted is simply that the destruction of social relationship, especially the family, is fundamentally opposed to healthy human life and the Christian vision of family. As the Church has noted time and again, the family is the building block of civilization and the Church. It is the training ground of healthy virtuous adults; it is the “communion of life and love”, in the words of JP II, which lies at the root of culture.

Second, we see an increasing attack if not outright rejection of all claims to absolute truth – especially in the area of morals. Relativism is no longer a position to be argued, it is the assumption that colours most of our public discourse. This has led to considerable confusion, even among Catholics, about sexuality, justice and natural law.

Third, we live in an age that idolizes money and its attendant social prestige. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, we are a society that makes financial concerns the heart of our politics and our cultural activity in many ways. Consider for a moment that the most important building in a Christian medieval town or a plaza mayor was the Church. Today we see our cities are dominated by skyscrapers devoted to a company, or a sports stadium, or shopping. I am not arguing that wealth is inherently evil; again the point is that it is now central to our society in an unhealthy way. In fact, even our conversations about poverty often assume that if only there was money, poverty would go away. There

³ (Archbishop Chaput, June 2010)

is almost no consideration of the even deadlier spiritual poverty that John Paul II and Mother Theresa did so much to expose.

Fourth, we live in a society that attacks all kinds of authority – especially that of God and fathers. It is hard to deny that fatherhood is disappearing not only in practice, but also in theory, as various forces have sought to discredit parental authority and redefine the family.

Fifth, we are faced with an unprecedented exposure to mass media. Several studies indicate that on average a citizen of this country is exposed to between 1500 and 3000 discreet advertising messages every single day. This means the power of propaganda is unprecedented. Consider as well that the message of most of this media is devoted to a non-Christian worldview. It preaches comfort, personal satisfaction, hedonism, individualism, the primacy of the material world, happiness as world success, false images of beauty – in short a vision of the world that is false. No wonder so many of our youth, whatever they are hearing at Church on Sunday's or even at home, are caught up in the reigning media idols and the pursuit of material goods and pleasures. (Note on Media and access to youth)

Sixth, and finally, we live in an age that prioritizes emotion over thinking. For most of our youth in particular, moral decisions are to be made according to how they *feel* about a situation or perhaps someone. Even religion is being reduced to emotion – how I feel about God or about others. The idea that you can rationally discuss religion is fading, because many people believe all religious knowledge is merely opinion. We have also lost the idea of moral reasoning – that is thinking about moral questions – which explains why even appeals to natural law in our public discourse fall on deaf ears. Thus in the most important questions of life – how ought I to live, is there right and wrong, what is the meaning of life, should I marry this person, what is the family for, we are left to how we feel, not how we think. This is a subversion of the Christian understanding of the human person. God gave us our Reason to govern our lives, and our emotions to lead us to the good. But our emotions cannot "see" what the right thing to do is, this is the task of our God-given reason.

So what ought we to do?

Retaining our Catholic identity – or the New Evangelization

Definition of New Evangelization:

- **Not new in sense of dogma, rather re-evangelization of a secularized culture**
- **Christianity is a way of life, not a technique or has to be caught as well as taught.**
- **The Gospel is the Gospel. But like the Dominicans and Franciscans and the Jesuits, our witness needs to take into account the times, of the particular challengers we face (not a technique, but perhaps new forms of expression)**

1. **Sitting still - playing defence - counting on cultural practices won't work.**
 - a. **1950's – culture practice of religion not strong enough**
 - b. **Public piety, or public devotion not strong enough alone either. Yes, we have hearts of gold, but we also need sharp and clear minds.**
 - c. **We have to go on offense – it's what the early Christians did. It's what Christians do in every age.**
 2. **Our own formation –**
 - a. **a lot said on this yesterday**
 - b. **Let me only add the importance of study and learning our faith. Many of us stopped studying the faith at our confirmation which may have been 6th or 8th grade. We will not be effective witnesses without some learning.**
 3. **Formation for your youth –**
 - a. **Catholic schools**
 - b. **But avoid the higher education trap. – worldly success can come at a cost**
 - c. **Cardinal Newman Society**
 4. **Defend the family**
 - a. **In our own lives first- be fathers and mothers. Take seriously our responsibility to first educators of our children**
 - b. **Invest in our marriages**
 - c. **Learn so that we can hand on – not just hand our kids over to others**
 - d. **Encourage our children to succeed first spiritually, then materially**
 5. **Limited exposure to media – limit propaganda, regain our reason, protect our children.**
 6. **Service to the poor. Key witness to the world.**
- Overall: Consider strengthening the formative element of CALL**

Conclusion – good news. HOPE (not trite optimism)
70% of teen indicate good marriage their primary goal.
Rising generation of committed Catholic youth.
The ecclesial movements.