

Stand with Children Faith and Action Circles



The Work of Evangelization of Culture for Marriage and Family

A two session series

1. Uniting in Christ for the Evangelization of Culture
 - a. Understanding Relativism and the Christian Response
 - b. Understanding the Challenge and the Mission

2. Reality, the Antidote For Relativism
 - a. Reality-based Thinking—an Awareness of Reality
 - b. Reality Known From Common Human Experience



CATHOLICS FOR THE
COMMON GOOD

EVANGELIZING THE CULTURE[®]

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Evangelization of Culture for Marriage and Family

SESSION 1

UNITING IN CHRIST FOR THE EVANGELIZATION OF CULTURE

We begin our reflection on the evangelization of culture for marriage and family with a discussion of how we got to where we are. How did our culture become relativistic? How can we recognize relativism, which finds its way into every person and every family, no matter how vigilant we may be. And, ultimately, we focus on the Christian response to the challenges we face in the culture today.

A. Understanding Relativism and the Christian Response

Relativism is a way of thinking in which there is no absolute or objective truth or reality. It is characterized by “What is true for you is not true for me,” or “That’s your reality; my reality is different.” Reality and values become subjective, that is, from the perspective of the individual, rather than objective, defined by the object, the idea, or act itself. In this way, the individual becomes the arbiter of all truth. Reality is what I believe it to be; there is no truth without my consent to it.

Relativism is a product of the Enlightenment, which began in the 17th century. The philosophers of the Enlightenment are best exemplified by Rene Descartes, known as the “father of modern philosophy”, who rejected all ideas unless they could be reasoned from what could be observed—“I think therefore I am (exist).” This has devolved into subjectivism—“whatever I think must be true—it is my reality.” This led to a separation of faith and reason. **Faith, a way of knowing truth about God’s plan for creation and the human person, must always inform and purify reason as it helps ground people in objective reality and what is right and wrong.**

Starting with the philosophers of this age, it became popular to pursue knowledge using reason alone, independent of faith. This limits knowledge to that which can be known through science, mathematics, and the social sciences. This is completely inadequate for understanding the mystery of the human person and the moral values and behaviors that contribute to human flourishing.

At first, the moral consequences were not apparent because, at the time, moral values and principles were well established in the culture. However, without the

link between faith and reason, culture’s values have devolved to secular individualism that is characterized by the pursuit of what suits me, the individual, rather than what is essential to the flourishing of each and therefore every person—the common good.

In a homily at a pre-conclave Mass before he was elected Pope, then Cardinal Josef Ratzinger said, “We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as definitive and has as its highest value one’s own ego and one’s own desires...”

With each person developing a value system specific to his own experiences, opinions, and concepts of “reality”, the logical consequence has been for tolerance to become a virtue. Religion, always “a good to be embraced and defended” is now seen as something to be only tolerated, as Rev. Thomas Williams, LC points out. “No one speaks of tolerating chocolate pudding or a spring walk in the park. By speaking of religious ‘tolerance,’ we make religion an unfortunate fact to be borne—like noisy neighbors and crowded buses—not a blessing to be celebrated.”¹ Tolerance, the new and evolving virtue, is nowhere to be found in any philosophical system prior to the 19th century. Toleration of good and “indulgence of evil in the absence of an overriding reason for doing so, has never been considered virtuous. Even today, indiscriminate tolerance would not be allowed. A public official tolerant of child abuse or tax evasion would hardly be considered a virtuous official.”²

Who determines what is tolerable and what is not? Who determines what is right or wrong? With no unifying concept of good and evil or the *common good*,³ this power is distributed among diverse groups of people each pursuing their private interests.⁴ They form coalitions around broad concepts to elect people sympathetic to their causes. They determine what is tolerable and what is not, and impose these values on others by enshrining them in law.

Pope Benedict XVI warns that, “Absolutizing what is not absolute but relative is called totalitarianism. It does not liberate man, but takes away his dignity and enslaves him.” In other words, making humanly

¹ Rev. Thomas D. Williams, LC, “The Myth of Religious Tolerance”

² *Ibid.*

³ Simply put, common refers to what is common for each and therefore every person without exception. Good is that which sustains life or contributes to human flourishing. Therefore the principle of the common good and the dignity of the human person can be said to provide the foundation for human rights.

⁴ This is defined as pluralism.

constructed arbitrary rules the absolute measure of values sets up a situation in which man is forced to comply with laws that may not be good for his flourishing as a human person.

Rather, laws based on the reality of the human person—objective truth and values that correspond with the dignity and destiny of the human person—are necessary for true freedom. However, Christians with this understanding are increasingly labeled as “intolerant”.

Faced with the effort to restore marriage between a man and a woman in California in 2008, then Bishop Allen Vigneron warned, “In the long term, if [our] efforts fail, our way of life will become counter-cultural, always a difficult situation for Christians—one our forebears faced in many ages past, one that the Lord himself predicted for us.”⁵

It may be instructive to reflect on a description of Christians living under persecution as described in a letter by an unknown author of the second or third century to Diognetus. The Christian response to persecution was not anger or violence, but love.

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. ... The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines.

They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor are glorified.

They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by

the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.⁶

B. Understanding the Challenge and the Mission

Vatican II's and Pope John Paul II's call for the New Evangelization and evangelization of culture is the Church's response to relativism. A major problem with relativism is that it obscures what it means to be human, and undermines the quest for truth, beauty, and goodness. No individual, and no family, is immune to its pernicious influences and effects. It is the root cause of the destruction of the weakest and most vulnerable of human life, and the destruction of marriage and the family, the very foundation of society. It is a threat to every family and every child.

For many, this threat is a source of frustration and anxiety. Complaining about the corruption of values and the poor judgment of others may make one feel good, but it does not contribute to a solution. This can cause a spiritual problem. Focusing on temporal or ideological solutions distracts us from the real answers provided by the Church. Fundamental to an authentic solution is the Church's teaching about the human person as a social being made in the image of God, the Trinity. Understanding that we are made for communion—love, relationship, and interdependence—transforms and grounds us in reality. It also provides the foundation for evangelizing those around us, starting in our families.

As a starting point, however, we must understand how relativism and subjectivism affect our families and us. We must learn how to discern and communicate in terms of reality—in a language that our children and friends can understand. We must come to recognize how the culture has influenced each of us—no one is immune.

As Archbishop Chaput told a gathering of Catholic scholars in September 2010, the response must start with our own conversions.⁷ This takes humility to turn to and surrender to the Holy Spirit, and to accept that we ourselves have been influenced by the culture of relativism in ways we may not appreciate.

We must end our isolation and form communities

⁵ Pastoral message on same-sex “marriage.” Bishop Allen Vigneron, Diocese of Oakland. May, 2008. <http://bit.ly/dmQtno>

⁶ Excerpt from the Letter of Mathetes to Diognetus. Mathetes is known to be a disciple of the apostles. This letter is dated as having originated prior to AD 130.

⁷ Archbishop Charles Chaput, Remarks to the *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars*. September 26, 2010. <http://ccgaction.org/christianculture>.

centered on Christ. We will develop the ability to clarify cultural confusion that is undermining the understanding of love, human sexuality, marriage, and family among our family members and friends with devastating consequences. We must learn to articulate these truths in ways that people can hear and understand for their own good and for the support of the public institution of marriage.

Only in communion with each other, through the reality of Christ in the Eucharist, can we prepare ourselves for the real work of the evangelization of culture.

Pope Benedict XVI addressed this issue in his 2010 Palm Sunday homily:

“Journeying on together with Jesus is at the same time also a journeying on in the ‘we’ of those who want to follow him. It introduces us into this community.

Since the way to true life, to being people in conformity with the model of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, surpasses our own strength, this journey always means being carried. We find ourselves, so to speak, roped to Jesus Christ together with him on the ascent towards God’s heights. He pulls and supports us. It is part of following Christ that we allow ourselves to be roped together; that we acknowledge we cannot do it alone. This act of humility, entering into the “we” of the Church is part of it; holding tight to the rope, the responsibility of communion, not breaking the rope through stubbornness or self-importance. Humbly believing, with the Church, like being a roped-party on the ascent towards God, is an essential condition for the following of Christ.

This being roped together also entails not behaving as masters of the Word of God, not running after a mistaken idea of emancipation. The humility of “being with” is essential for the ascent.

“Let us sum up: the following of Christ requires, as a first step, a reawakening of the desire to be authentic human beings and thus the reawakening of oneself for God. It then requires us to join the climbing party, in the communion of the Church. In the “we” of the Church we enter into communion with the “you” of Jesus Christ and thus reach the path to God. We are also asked to listen to the Word of Jesus Christ and to live it: in faith, hope and love. Thus we are on the way toward the definitive Jerusalem and, from this moment, in a

certain way, we already find ourselves there, in the communion of all God’s Saints.”⁸

Questions for Reflection

These questions are offered for personal reflection. They may help you as you share with the other members of your Circle. In addition, use these questions as reminders of the content of this chapter as you share with friends and family in the coming week.

- What is the meaning of relativism? How has it developed since the Enlightenment? How am I influenced by relativism?
- What does tolerance mean? What is the connection between relativism and tolerance? Is tolerance a loving word?
- How does the imposition of relativism harm me? How does it inhibit my ability to live reality?
- Do you see parallels between the time of the early Christians and our own time? What does that say about our response to attacks on Christianity?
- Why is joining together in Faith & Action Circles important for our mission of evangelization of culture? What are the implications of being roped together in Christ for each of us?

Reflection on Terms

Sometimes it is useful to reflect further on the meaning of some of the terms used in the Faith & Action Circles. If the meaning is still unclear, ask your moderator for clarification or discuss the word or concept with your Circle members.

- **Relativism**—seeing things from our own perspective rather than the way things really are. The consequence of this is that there are no absolutes. Truth becomes only what can be proven, like science and math, everything else becomes subject to interpretation or is determined by the majority.
- **Communion**—“[B]elonging, oneness, unity in charity, forgiveness, helping people, self-sacrifice, intimacy. United with one who loves me, I can face any fear ... I am up to any

⁸ Excerpt from Pope Benedict homily, 3/28/2010, <http://bit.ly/dc1TCC>

challenge.”⁹

- Communion (Eucharist)—Pope Benedict: “communion always and inseparably has both a vertical and a horizontal sense: it is communion with God and communion with our brothers and sisters” (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 76). This is an intimacy with Christ, him in us and us in him. Where Christ is, so is the Father and so is the Holy Spirit, and so is his mother, Mary, and so is the saints including our deceased loved ones who may be in communion with him. We are together, belonging through Christ. And at the same time we are in intimate relationship through Christ with the priest, our bishop, the stranger in the pew next to us and with the Catholic stranger on the other side of the world.
- New Evangelization—This term, introduced by John Paul II, describes the revitalization of the Church and her response to new challenges faced in evangelization today. By focusing on the Person of Jesus Christ and a personal encounter with him, the Church knows “he will give his Spirit and provide the force to announce and proclaim the Gospel in new ways which can speak to today’s cultures.”¹⁰
- Evangelization of Culture—The term refers to living the faith in a way that transforms the culture leading to a society that respects the dignity of the human person and leads to justice and human flourishing.

⁹ Peter John Camerons, OP, *Magificat*, June 2011

¹⁰ Lineamenta, “Lineamenta: The New Evangelization for the Transmission of Faith, 2012

Evangelization of Culture for Marriage and Family

SESSION 2

REALITY, THE ANTIDOTE FOR RELATIVISM

The first chapter explored the kind of thinking that has led to the crisis in marriage and family in our culture. Now we need to delve more deeply into the reality of love, marriage, and family. How do we overcome the effects of relativism, starting within ourselves? In this session we begin the study of “reality-based thinking”, the way of knowing and discussing reality that corresponds with common human experience. We will become aware of falsehoods we accept without realizing it. We can verify these to be true by turning to our own experience.

A. Reality-based Thinking—an Awareness of Reality

The antidote for relativism is **indisputable reality**. What is that? It is **reality** that can be confirmed by an indisputable fact. Let’s explore what this is, but first why it is important.

Today there is no common understanding of reality and truth. Because of this, conversations discussing fundamental truths about the human person and realities such as marriage and the family are impeded. Words that we say may be absolutely true, but they may be incoherent to the listener whose understanding is based on different assumptions about “reality” or the meaning of a word. We can often end up arguing about apples and oranges without realizing it.

For example, when we talk about marriage, we may be thinking of marriage as the Church teaches—the union of a man and a woman as the foundation of the family—a mother, a father, and children. People we are talking with, however, may believe that marriage is merely a committed relationship between loving adults for their personal fulfillment. When we talk about the goods of marriage and family, what we say may not sound relevant to our listeners (including our children) because they are thinking about a different definition of marriage, one for which procreation, complementarity, children, and family are not important.

The way to compensate and ensure better communication is to clarify the terms and anchor such conversations in indisputable realities. This is difficult, because most of us are so influenced by the culture of relativism that we are not tuned to recognize false assumptions or can unwittingly say things that conflict with what we know to be true.

Confusion is pervasive, particularly concerning

marriage, parenting, family, and human sexuality. Marriage is seen to be adult-centric rather than family-centric. Sex is no longer viewed as procreative and unitive as the Church teaches, but is considered to be either a means of self-expression or of creating a sense of intimacy for self. With contraception and abortion, subconsciously we know that every woman who is a mother is a mother by choice. Having children has become a life-style choice leading to absurd statements such as, “Just because she chose to be a mother does not mean I chose to be a father.” Of course, the reality is that at the moment of conception, the woman is a mother and the man is a father. This leads people to believe they have a right to a child, whether married or not. In reality, who has a right to another person?

With parenting separated from marriage, the important value becomes competency in parenting, which makes men and women interchangeable in child rearing and reduces the significance of the relationship between children and their natural mothers and fathers.

Reality-based thinking is a term that Catholics for the Common Good uses to describe having an awareness of absolute, indisputable reality. Having this awareness of reality helps us talk to family and friends about the reality of love, marriage, family, and human sexuality in secular language compatible with the teachings of the Church. Since all reality comes from Jesus Christ and, in turn, points to him, having an increased awareness of reality can lead us into a more intimate encounter with Christ.

For example, without thinking, it is easy to accept that not every child has a mother and father. But, on reflection, we realize that is not true.

What is the reality? Everyone has a mother and a father. Mothers and fathers are therefore common to each and every child without exception. They are also good, meaning they contribute to human flourishing and are part of our identity—who we are and where we came from. These are all indisputable facts, which we can verify by our own desire for connection—to know, to be loved, and to be cared for by the man and woman from whom we originated.

Therefore, when a child loses a mother, father or both, the reality is that the child is in a state of privation of something common and good. That sounds harsh to our ears, but it is a fact for which there is little awareness in the culture. This privation is starkly apparent to children, despite common denial by adults. Does this put pressure on children to deny what they know to be

true to conform to the “reality” that conforms to the desires of adults? Drawing on our own desire for connection with the man and woman from whom we were born can help remind us of the significance of the relationship that can be known by everyone and is not dependent upon belief in God. Now look at Catholic teaching on this.

“The child has the right to be . . . brought up within marriage: it is through the secure and recognized relationship to his own parents that the child can discover his own identity and achieve his own proper human development. The parents find in their child . . . the permanent sign of their conjugal union, the living and indissoluble concrete expression of their paternity and maternity”¹¹

Not only does this teaching express the experience and rights of the child, “The permanent sign of their conjugal union” also expresses the reality of the child as an eternal witness to “one flesh union” from the Bible. The child carries the flesh of the mother and father whether or not they have freely chosen to make themselves irreplaceable to each other in marriage.

It should start becoming evident that these things are not true simply because they are in the Bible or because the Church teaches them. Rather, the Church teaches what it does because it is true. The Church does not create. We can turn with confidence to the teachings of the Church for a deeper understanding of reality.

Thinking in terms of reality helps us communicate in ways that people know what we are saying is true. We have just expressed the reality of God’s plan for creation in secular terms that does not depend on belief in God to understand. Thinking this way also helps to build confidence in Church doctrine as we develop a deeper understanding of why she teaches what she does and can verify it for ourselves. Scripture can take on a whole new dimension as it builds on what we know to be true and leads us deeper into the mystery of the human person made in the image and likeness of the Trinity.

B. Reality Known From Common Human Experience

In the culture of relativism, most people to varying

¹¹ *Donum Vitae, II, A, Section 1, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1987*

extents turn to their own authority and experience to determine what is true or not, or what is good or not. This is called subjective thinking. If we are honest with ourselves, almost everyone has twinges of doubt about something the Church teaches. If we know that everything the Church teaches is true, why do we have trouble excepting everything unless we can understand and agree with it? We seem to need to be able to verify the truth of things for ourselves. Instead of trying to understand the implications of being made in the image of the Trinity, it is easy to unwittingly create a concept of God that conforms with our view of reality. This, in a sense, makes us a creator of god.

Blessed John Paul made beautiful and ground-breaking advances in the understanding of the human person and the consequences in being made in the image of God – the Trinity. He also taught in a way that people could verify the truth of what he was teaching. According to many theologians, his teaching could influence the course of theology for perhaps the next thousand years. Father Richard M. Hogan describes the significance of Blessed John Paul’s contribution in *An Introduction to John Paul II’s Theology of the Body*:¹²

From the very first words of *The Theology of the Body*, one realizes that John Paul’s approach to theology differs from those taken by the great representatives of the Catholic theological tradition: Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas... While rooted in both the Augustinian and Thomistic traditions, it is crystal clear that John Paul’s Theology of the Body has a startling and unexpected new “twist.” It, together with his other works, represents a new synthesis, a new way of conveying the faith to the modern world.

This new approach is necessary because most people in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries do not think and act in the categories of either Saint Thomas or Saint Augustine... Both Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas lived and taught in a culture which might be described as objective, deductive, and principled. The modern world is primarily subjective, inductive, and experiential.

Objective means that something is real, i.e., it is true, regardless of whether or not I know it to be true. For example, if a blind man is outside, but cannot see the trees, the trees are still

¹²Hogan, Rev. Richard. *An Introduction to John Paul II’s Theology of the Body*.

there. Even though he does not perceive them, the trees are truly there. The existence of the trees does not depend on whether the blind man perceives them or not. Objective reality exists independent of one's perception.

The subjective view of reality claims that only that which I perceive to be real is actually real. Generally, the subjective view of reality is not applied to trees and physical objects. However, it is applied to non-physical realities, e.g., truths about the existence of God, truths about morality. The subjective view of reality is clearly captured by the phrase, "That may be true for you, but not for me!" In other words, what is true depends on what I believe or accept, or better phrased, on what I perceive. In the medieval world, such a claim would be utter nonsense. In fact, to most medieval academics, the truths of the faith, both dogmatic and moral truths, were more real than physical objects. The medieval world was objective. We are subjective.

We have observed that reality can be known without the benefit of revelation. Some aspects of reality can be observed through the senses, or by observation using mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology and social sciences (everyone has a mother and father, every person has the DNA from their mother and father, etc.).

Other reality such as the mystery of the human person, abstract thought, and the desire for truth, beauty, and communion with the divine cannot be known by observing atoms and molecules that make up the human body. However, these are indeed realities. While they cannot be physically observed, they can be verified by common human experience.

For example, why do we resist being reduced to an object of use or a number? Somehow, we know we are more than a number, a thing, or an object for the use and exploitation by others. We have a sense that we are more than just simply material beings. How do we know this? Where does this sense come from?

Consider our discomfort with nakedness. The experience of Adam and Eve after the Fall is an experience that we have all inherited—a primordial human experience. It is a direct experience of the effects of original sin—an instinctive awareness of sin and the potential for being exploited in our defenseless nakedness as an object of use by another. These are experiences of our transcendent dignity and our

inherent need to protect and defend it.

The awareness of our transcendence can become obscured by sin and the influences of the culture in which we are immersed. In this age of confusion, and because of the effect of original sin, people can unwittingly act against their nature and their good by turning themselves and others into objects of use and exploitation in a disordered quest for happiness. With the aid of Church teaching, we can reawaken the reality and experience of our own humanness as God created us. These realities are stamped in our nature.

Questions for Reflection

These questions are offered for personal reflection. They may help you as you share with the other members of your Circle. In addition, use these questions as reminders of the content of this chapter as you share with friends and family in the coming week.

- Have you noticed how we sometimes unwittingly accept things that are false? Is it possible for us to know and recognize indisputable reality, or are we too influenced by the culture of relativism?
- What confusion of terms, particularly relating to sexuality, marriage, or family, do we recognize that we have used? How can we change our own language to refer to reality?
- Blessed John Paul's revolutionary approach to the human person and reality cuts through relativism and individual definitions of truth. How can we apply this method in our own conversations?
- How can we draw on common human experience to help anchor conversation on what is good and true about the human person.
- How does our awareness of our own transcendence -- resistance to being used or exploited help us confirm the dignity of that comes from being made in the image of God?