

# Awakening from Reason's Sleep

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**W**e are here in Gardone to talk about the path to a Catholic revival in all dimensions of life. Choosing the right path depends on the right understanding of our situation and its difficulties. Today I'll be talking about one difficulty for our project, the modern understanding of reason, and suggest ways of dealing with it.

## **1 Modern reason**

Reason is fundamental. It's the way we form solid conclusions regarding the good, beautiful and true. It aligns our thought with the world. It follows that a particular understanding of reason goes with a particular understanding of man, knowledge and reality. Such understandings can be more or less adequate. The modern understanding is radically defective. It takes a fragment of reason, scientific reason, and treats it as the whole. The result is that it deceives us as to its nature, as to the nature of the world, and as to our own nature.

### **1.1 History**

The modern idea of reason has deep roots in Western history. You can trace some of its aspects back as far as the West has existed. It reaches clear expression with René Descartes and Francis Bacon:

1. Descartes wanted to have knowledge that would stand up against any possible doubt. He couldn't doubt the reality of

his own experience—“*cogito ergo sum*”—so he wanted to use that as the basis of all knowledge. Knowledge becomes a construction from human experience.

2. Bacon was practically-minded. He wanted to reconstruct knowledge on experimental principles for “the relief of man’s estate.” He was the one who said “knowledge is power.” Knowledge becomes a tool.

Put the two views together and you get a minimalist view of knowledge. We should be as skeptical as possible, and take nothing on faith, but base knowledge and our whole way of acting as much as possible on our own experience. Also, the purpose of knowledge is practical. It has to do with getting what we want. All traces of the transcendent, of anything that goes beyond human purposes and experience, are excluded.

You can trace what’s happened to knowledge in the history of the word “speculation”:<sup>1</sup>

1. c.1374, “contemplation, consideration,” from O.Fr. speculation, from L.L. *speculatio* “contemplation, observation,” from L. *speculatus*, pp. of *speculari* “observe,” from *specere* “to look at, view.”
2. Disparaging sense of “mere conjecture” is recorded from 1575.
3. Meaning “buying and selling in search of profit from rise and fall of market value” is recorded from 1774.

So “speculation”—taking a position not based on knowledge as power—has gone from man’s noblest faculty, speculative reason or contemplation, to making stuff up, to trying to get money without knowing what you’re about.

## 1.2 Basic Principles

Such views have led to the view that modern natural science is the only knowledge worthy of the name. The latter view can be called scientism or scientific fundamentalism.

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<sup>1</sup>Online Etymology Dictionary.

Scientism limits knowledge to a very few things:

1. Disinterested observations that can be repeated and verified by any properly trained observer.
2. Formal logic, including mathematics, and especially measurement. Such things enable us to organize our observations and make them impersonal and usable.
3. Induction. What happened in the past will happen in the future. Knowledge is therefore prediction: knowledge of how events depend on other events, especially those we can control. That's the meaning of the experimental method: knowledge is control.
4. Any additional beliefs are subject to Occam's Razor, otherwise known as the rule of parsimony. Occam's Razor says you make the minimum addition to what the other 3 points tell you that lets you deal with whatever is at hand. You should be especially reluctant to multiply entities. So if you think you can get by with matter, you should be very reluctant to add something of a different type, like spirit.

Occam's Razor is important. When someone tells you "that's just your opinion" or "you're just trying to force your values on other people" it's an appeal to Occam's Razor. The idea is that there's already a system of knowledge—modern natural science—that works and everyone can agree on, and you're appealing to something outside that system. You're trying to bring in something unnecessary and unfounded, and therefore irrational.

### **1.3 Strengths**

The principles of scientific thought are designed to deal with objects in space and it seems they should be limited to that. Nonetheless, scientific thought has qualities that make people want to extend its use as widely as possible:

1. It has been extremely successful in dealing with many important issues.

2. It has great intellectual appeal. It can be very fruitful when applied with discipline, attentiveness and ingenuity, so it calls forth high-quality intellectual effort.
3. It's intolerant of other forms of thought. It rejects them as a matter of basic principle, since the point is to rely on as few principles as possible.

## **1.4 Knowledge and reality**

On the scientific view, we can know only things that can be observed and measured by any trained observer who follows the appropriate procedures, and things that are connected to observations by a theory that makes predictions and so can be tested, and is as simple, mathematical, and consistent with other accepted theories as possible. Since those are the only things we know, those are the only things we can treat as real.

Anything beyond that is not knowledge at all. It's opinion or feeling or taste or prejudice. It's subjective and has no objective reality. In particular:

1. Knowledge of the good and beautiful is not knowledge. It follows that those things are not real, at least not as we think of them. They are only preferences.
2. Contemplation is not knowledge. Knowledge is experimental and oriented toward control, while contemplation does not affect what it contemplates. It does alter the contemplator, though, so it can be a psychological technique. Religion therefore becomes psychological therapy.

## **1.5 A scientific world**

It's worth noting the general consequences of accepting scientism:

1. Scientific method makes what we can bring about and what we know to be true very closely related. Rationality therefore comes to mean dealing with the world technologically: knowledge has to do with controlling things to get what we want.

2. Technology abolishes history and particular connections. A computer works the same in all settings—it doesn't care what you program it to do—and it can interact with equal facility with any other computer anywhere. A technological world therefore exists in a sort of eternal now without past, place, context, or future, in which everything becomes a neutral resource for the achievement of the projects of whoever is in control.
3. At the level of politics and morality, technology's only concern is our ability to get what we want, which it defines as freedom and the good. The "Public Good" becomes the Will of the Powerful.
4. On the level of fantasy, which technological society encourages because it's boring and treats human goals as utterly arbitrary, it brings us what now passes as literary and artistic culture: willfulness, ideology, joyless hedonism, mindless rebellion.
5. At the level of physical design, a technocratic world is marked by placelessness, sprawl, and mono-functionally zoned urban areas emblematic of values-free material production.<sup>2</sup> Similar kinds of organization prevail in other aspects of life.

## **1.6 A note on postmodernism**

I've said that scientism reigns supreme. You hear sometimes that's old hat, that the Cartesian outlook has been superseded, that we're in an open-ended postmodern age, and so on.

Don't believe it. Social constructivism, cultural relativism and multiculturalism don't answer questions. When decisions have to be made, you have to have some way of making them. The effect of such views is to put an even greater premium on claims to disinterested objective expertise, because that's the only thing that can negotiate the differing and equally valid views of various cultures.

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<sup>2</sup>A phrase due to Dino Marcantonio.

In fact, pomo views make it harder to contest claims of scientific expertise since they debunk nonexpert knowledge so totally.

As an operational matter, the slogans you hear—diversity, tolerance, multiculturalism—all mean the same thing:

What you think is on a level with what a witch doctor or flat earther thinks. It has no special connection to reality, so you'll just screw up if you try to decide anything on your own. So shut up, be a good boy, and do what the experts tell you to do.

## **2 Liberalism**

Since scientism applies to everything, it applies to morality and politics.

Human beings are, among other things, objects in space. It follows that you can apply the methods of the modern natural sciences to them. Since you can do that, Occam's Razor says you should do that—exclusively. You should try to rely, not just in physiology and physical anthropology but even in politics, morality and social relations generally, on something as close to scientific reasoning as possible. It's irrational to do otherwise.

When you take the scientific and technological outlook and apply it to social issues, you get the present-day understanding of politics and morality: liberalism (using the term in the American sense). Other forms of modernity, like communism, have turned out not to work and have mostly been abandoned.

### **2.1 Logic and power**

It's important to understand that liberalism has a definite logic behind it, which is the same as the current understanding of what's rational. That's why it's so enormously powerful. It's thought to be equivalent to reason itself.

In traditionalist circles discussions of liberalism are often dismissive. Liberals are crazy, they're stupid, there's something wrong with them or whatever. Dismissive theories have some truth in

them, but they obviously aren't the whole truth. If liberalism is so stupid, how come it always wins? If it's so crazy, how come everyone knows what it requires? And how did it get to be so pervasive?

Even people who officially don't believe in the basic principles of liberalism—would-be adherents of traditional religions or whoever—most often accept them in practice. We find them in ourselves. It's very hard to avoid falling into the basic assumptions on which the people around us carry on discussions. The most basic of those assumptions is their understanding of reason, and liberalism is required by reason as now understood.

## **2.2 Principles**

If scientific reasoning is applied to human relations, it gives us:

1. A highest good: freedom, understood as satisfaction of desire. Preference and aversion are universal and observable. So why not stick with them as guides, and concentrate on setting up a system that gets us what we want and gets rid of what we don't want? Why bring in other standards based on things that are harder to demonstrate, like God or the good, beautiful, and true? That would be unscientific and therefore irrational.
2. A highest moral demand: equality. Since what is good is simply what is desired, and all desires are equally desires, it follows that all goods are equally goods. To say one man's desires are less valuable than another's is simply to value him less. That's arbitrary, discriminatory, and oppressive. It's the sort of thing that leads to Auschwitz. It follows that all men and desires must be treated equally.

In effect, scientism says that there aren't any transcendent goods, there's just desire, and there aren't any essences of things that we have to accept and respect, the world is what we make of it. So the point of politics, social life, and morality must be to treat the world as a pure resource and turn the social order into a kind of machine for giving people whatever they happen to want, as long as what they want fits the smooth functioning of the system.

That ideal is the same as the present-day liberal ideal. It follows that liberalism can be demonstrated to be correct given the present understanding of reason. That feature gives liberalism an insuperable advantage in political and moral discussion. If you reject it you're being irrational.

### **2.3 Specific features**

The specific features of the liberal system follow from its basic nature. These include:

1. Universality. Reason is universal. Whatever it demands applies always and everywhere. Since liberalism follows from reason, the same is true of liberalism.
2. Absolute validity. A system based simply on reason is the only possible legitimate system. Dissidents are not properly part of political discussion and can be ignored or suppressed.
3. Insistence on practical abolition of all standards and institutions at odds with the unity, clarity, universality, and efficiency of the system. That's what "inclusiveness," "tolerance," "culture war" and "life" issues are all about.
  - (a) For a rational technological system to exist, everything has to be transparent and manageable from the point of view of those on top. All institutions have to have a clear rational orientation toward maximizing preference satisfaction or equality. The only institutions that make the cut are markets (especially global markets) and bureaucracies (especially transnational bureaucracies) that are run on liberal principles.
  - (b) Traditional and local institutions—family, religion, nation, and non-liberal conceptions of personal integrity and dignity are
    - i. Opaque and resistant to outside control. They're recalcitrant.
    - ii. Not oriented toward maximum equal satisfaction of individual preference. They're oppressive.

- iii. Not based on expert scientific knowledge. They're ignorant and prejudiced.
- iv. Based on distinctions and authorities that aren't required by liberal market and bureaucratic institutions. The family, for example, is based on distinctions of sex, age, and blood. It follows that such institutions are hateful and bigoted.

So nonliberal institutions have no right to exist. Their very existence makes a just, rational, and efficient social order impossible. If you can't get rid of them altogether then at least you can turn them into optional private tastes and consumer goods that are not allowed to affect social relations. You can—and should—privatize sex, family, religion, and personal morality.

## **2.4 Absolute dominance**

All these conclusions are thought to be a direct and obvious consequence of reason as such. What part of maximum equal satisfaction of legitimate preferences are you going to reject? If you oppose them

1. You're ignorant, confused, and irrational, since what you're for is against reason and not based on knowledge.
2. You're trying to get what you want at the expense of what other people want. You're greedy.
3. Since you want to stick other people with what you want them to have instead of what they want, you're willful and oppressive. You're a bigot and a hater.

Liberals say they believe in reason. On their understanding of reason, which is the official public understanding, they're right beyond all possibility of discussion. Their opponents are not just wrong but so obviously wrong that there's something wrong not only with their arguments but with the opponents themselves.

Those are the views that are taught in the schools, presented by reputable public figures, and guide respectable statecraft. That's

why here in the EU you can be fined heavily or put in jail for saying there are problems with homosexuality or Islam.

That's also why Catholic traditionalists are so suspicious of "dialogue." It's not that it's bad to discuss things with people, Jesus and Paul and Thomas Aquinas did it all the time. It's that the rules of discussion—the accepted understandings of what's reasonable—are stacked against us. They make it conceptually impossible for our points to be understood in public discussion: public discussion must be based on principles acceptable to all parties, but the only principles liberals will accept are stripped-down principles that automatically give back scientism and liberalism when treated as the sole basis of knowledge and morality.

### **3 Objections in principle**

We'll never get anywhere if we're unable to discuss things with people—if we're unable to "dialogue." So what do we do?

If the accepted understanding of reason is taken for granted, we lose. So we have to understand and insistently point out the problems with that understanding.

#### **3.1 Scientism**

Modern natural science is obviously incomplete as a system. It can't possibly be the whole of knowledge.

##### **3.1.1 Science is dependent**

To work at all it needs things that are not science. It requires common sense and judgment. You can't tell whether a scientific theory is true or even worth bothering with by running a chemical test on it.

Science requires

1. The assumption that we can distinguish science and scientists from their bogus versions, and that we can understand the point of what scientists are saying, when they should be

taken seriously, and how their results should be interpreted and applied.

So science requires social and personal awareness—the ability to recognize and classify social networks and degrees of authority and personal reliability, and to understand the setting in which someone is speaking and his purpose in speaking.

2. The assumption that the scientific community will be ready and able to sort through all the possibilities and pick out the most likely ones—that is, the best supported theories—at least on the whole, in the long run, and to an extent that makes scientific consensus reliable as a general rule. Science requires faith in a particular human community: the scientific community.
3. The assumption of a world in which science makes sense. As the Pope said at Regensburg:

Modern scientific reason quite simply has to accept the rational structure of matter and the correspondence between our spirit and the prevailing rational structures of nature as a given, on which its methodology has to be based. Yet the question why this has to be so is a real question.

These assumptions seem mostly reasonable. The point though is not that they are false or unreasonable but that they are necessary to science but not part of science and not scientifically demonstrable. The claim science is the whole of our knowledge must therefore be false. Our general understanding of the world, and our knowledge of other people and our faith in them—our common sense and acceptance of our social nature—come first.

### **3.1.2 Science is limited in scope**

Modern natural science achieves its power by limiting what it can deal with. It can't deal with the whole of life. In particular, science doesn't deal well with:

1. Things that can't be measured, like the good and beautiful.
2. Things that aren't observed by trained observers. Rogue waves provide an example. For years, oceanographers denied their existence in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.
3. Things that can't be observed repeatedly, for example specific events in the past. They're not repeatable, and they usually weren't observed by anyone with scientific training, so the scientific outlook has trouble with them. Also, if something's really out of the ordinary, science tosses it aside as an anomalous data point. That's why history that claims to be scientific says miracles never happen. It's not that it proves they never happen, it's that if one happened scientific history couldn't know about it.
4. Things no one knows what to do with, like the match between the coast of Africa and the coast of South America before the continental drift hypothesis. If you don't know what to do with something, or the answer seems too weird, investigation goes on in other channels.
5. Things, like my own subjective experience, that can't be observed at all by randomly chosen observers. Modern natural science has a big problem with consciousness, so theoreticians of science often ignore it or deny its existence or redefine it as something else. That takes denying the obvious to a whole new level. The movement that started with "cogito ergo sum" ends by denying consciousness.

The basic point, once again, is that science can only be a part of our knowledge. It is a specialized application of common sense and reason, but not the whole of those things.

### **3.2 Problems with liberalism**

The problems of scientism, which are the problems of trying to do too much with too little, reappear as problems of liberalism. The basic problem with liberalism is that you won't understand human

life or deal with it sensibly if you try to rationalize it too much and leave out qualities and distinctions that can't be measured.

### **3.2.1 Can't deal with issues**

For starters, you won't be able to deal with questions of what's good and bad. Good and bad are qualitative issues, so scientific reasoning can't deal with them.

Liberal thinkers claim their approach lets a hundred flowers bloom because it stands outside arguments as to the nature of the good. Each can follow his bliss. The claim is obviously false. The "good" is simply whatever it is that makes a goal worth pursuing. No comprehensive way of organizing things—no government or social order—can stand outside arguments about what goals are worth pursuing. There are too many things that demand a decision that forecloses other decisions. If a government claims to be based simply on freedom and equality, and not on any definite conception of the good, then either the laws don't make sense or something is being hidden.

### **3.2.2 Self-referentiality**

The attempt to leave the question of the good unsettled causes lots of problems. Equal freedom doesn't have the substantive content to answer questions. Free to do what? Equal in what respect? Liberalism can't say, so it remains stuck at its starting point and becomes self-referential. Instead of freedom we get the cause of freedom as the supreme good. Freedom becomes freedom to be liberal. Political correctness is the "left wing" version of how that works in practice, while the Iraq war and global democracy are the "right-wing" version. Both are examples of the aggressive intolerance of liberalism.

### **3.2.3 Forced simplicity**

Liberalism wants to say that freedom is freedom to do what you want. In order to say that it has to abolish conflicting desires.

Such a strategy makes anything anybody wants that affects other people a problem. As a result:

1. Human goals must be limited to those that either don't affect other people or can be fully integrated into a universal rational system of production, distribution and control. The model for all freedom becomes Burger King's "have it your way"—the ability to choose completely arbitrarily among preset goods the system finds equally easy to provide: careers, consumer goods, and private indulgences. All other goals are ruled out of order, because they can't be managed and might cause disputes or disruption.
2. To that end, all human conduct, attitudes and relationships have to be supervised and controlled. Otherwise the wrong sort of goals will creep in. As we've noted, all social arrangements that can't be supervised, controlled, and made irrelevant to everyone but the isolated individual have got to go. Otherwise you will have centers of social power, like traditional religion, the family, and actual community, that will not be liberal and so violate freedom and equality.

Modern insistence on absolute rigor in reasoning led to equal freedom as the ultimate goal of social life. Dropping the question of the good seemed a way to avoid insoluble problems.

Equal freedom is not up to the job. It has to strip everything down to its own level of simplicity, and the effort to do so leads to a demanding, intolerant, oppressive, mindless, and inhuman fanaticism. People believe in it as the highest principle, and view anything else as irrational, oppressive and violent. If you're "extremist" or "divisive"—liberals say that instead of "heretical" and "schismatic" but it means the same thing—you have to be destroyed before you plunge us all into hell.

Liberalism supposedly started out to put an end to religious oppression and violence but instead sets up a new and perverse religion that destroys what people actually care about.

## **4 Constructing a response**

What do we do about all this?

### **4.1 Critique of technological reason**

Obviously, we need a different and broader conception of reason. That's not just my idea. At Regensburg, the Pope said,

The intention ... is not one of retrenchment or negative criticism [of the achievements of modern thought], but of broadening our concept of reason and its application.... We [must] overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically verifiable, and ... once more disclose its vast horizons.

So we have to put modern secularist reason—reason that accepts the self-imposed limitation the Pope mentions—in question. We have to point to a source of knowledge other than modern natural science. Otherwise nothing we say will make sense to anyone.

### **4.2 Tradition and knowledge**

How do we do that?

#### **4.2.1 Tradition**

One way is to point out the necessity of tradition for knowledge. That is a consequence of the ineradicable personal, social, and informal aspects of knowledge of the world. Good sense and judgment are necessary for knowledge. They're necessary for science itself. Descartes thought he could take good sense for granted:

Good sense is, of all things among men, the most equally distributed: for every one thinks himself so abundantly provided with it, that those even who are the most difficult to satisfy in everything else, do not usually desire

a larger measure of this quality than they already possess.<sup>3</sup>

It's a very amusing quotation. Descartes meant it literally though. He had to mean it literally, because otherwise his system of universal clear knowledge based on individual subjective experience couldn't work. Judgement and good sense can't be pinned down and defined, so unless Descartes can assume them away as an issue, by claiming everyone has as much as he needs, knowledge can't be made clear, rigorous, and unified in the way he wants.

In fact, of course, they are subtle, complex and hard to judge, and our need for them is all-pervasive. Some of us have more of them than others, and none of us has enough.

So where do we get them? The most important source is general experience—dealing with whatever life throws up and seeing what works, what doesn't, and what comes into focus. We can't know all our principles, and our reasoning can't always be made explicit. It follows that we need Pascal's "intuitive mind," which is the same as Newman's "illative sense," as well the "geometrical mind" Descartes recognized.

Since the world is subtle and complicated, and since none of us knows everything, we also need social experience, or tradition. Reason—our ability to come to solid and reliable conclusions—thus depends on tradition. Without tradition judgement and good sense disappear, and we cannot say what things are or what they mean. Science and liberalism themselves cannot function without it. There is a scientific and a liberal tradition.

So we have a source of knowledge that enables us to evaluate beliefs and actions to decide whether they're worth accepting and doing. That source is tradition. Everybody relies on it, so everybody must admit its authority.

#### **4.2.2 Revelation**

Which tradition, though? Presumably, one that can make sense of itself as a tradition. That rules out scientism and liberalism right

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<sup>3</sup>Discourse on Method.

away, since their claim of comprehensive perspicuous rationality rules out reliance on tradition.

The tradition we choose should also be a tradition that isn't doomed to fall apart. Tradition by itself has certain problems. It can be wrong, but I don't think that's the real problem, since it's reasonable to suppose that if experience misleads you then more experience is the best thing to set you straight. The more basic problem is that by itself tradition can't maintain its coherence and its ability to guide us reliably. The reason is that in and of itself tradition—the simple accumulation of experience and what various people have said and done—can't resolve all the issues it throws up. Look at where mainstream Protestantism, which relies solely on the accumulation of experience, discussion, and the decisions of particular men, has ended up. Look at where modern thought as a whole has ended up.

Discussion need not lead to consensus.<sup>4</sup> Tradition needs a principle of authority transcending tradition to resolve the issues it can't resolve on its own. Science has recourse to observation. That's fine for objects in space, but not everything is an object in space. On other issues tradition needs an authority that transcends human capacities generally.

Tradition must therefore rely on revelation. Without revelation tradition can't remain coherent, and coherent thought and reason, which depend on tradition, are impossible in the long run. Revelation, however, does not settle its own interpretation. It needs an interpretive method backed by authority that can be relied on to resolve basic issues. It needs, in fact, something that functions like a universal church with an organ of infallibility. In short, it needs a pope.

If no pope is available we can no longer rely on tradition, since we know in advance it won't be able to resolve the basic issues life will predictably throw up. We know it's going to fall apart—not develop in accordance with its own principles, but fall apart—so we can't rationally view it as the emerging form of truth. Since we can't believe in it, and since connected thought and belief depend

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<sup>4</sup>Compare John Rawls's belief that free discussion doesn't lead to definite conclusions on basic issues.

on acceptance of tradition, we can't rationally believe in anything.

In summary: without a coherent tradition worthy of rational belief, reason falls apart. Without some definite way to resolve questions that can't otherwise be resolved, no such tradition can exist. We can't get by without something very much like the Church. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* is, among other things, a statement of the necessity of an authoritative Church based on revelation to a life of reason.

## **5 Making it real**

The problems that have led us to our present situation are as basic as the definition of what's rational, what's real, and what's good. That's pretty basic. Our response has to be equally so.

### **5.1 Intellectual life**

We have to outdo the rationalists on their own ground, and show that our reason is more reasonable than theirs. Catholics and traditionalists need a clear intellectual understanding of their position so they can make plain to those who will listen the rationality of that position and the fideism and obscurantism of the opposing views now established. They have to expose the clay feet of modernity and show how to do better.

That's not a hopeless task. Liberal modernity is strong, but it has fundamental weaknesses that mean it can't last. It can be beaten if fought at the level of those weaknesses. If we think of it as vulnerable we have a chance to be effective; if we don't we're more likely to complain among ourselves and leave it at that. In this talk we've discussed its irrationality, and the necessity of some points of Catholic doctrine, for example a magisterial Church. Many writers have further explicated the rationality of Catholicism. If we assimilate those points and apply them to our own situation that we will be "ready always to satisfy every one that asketh you a reason of that hope which is in you." (1 Peter 3:15)

As to our opponents, victory makes people stupid. That's especially true when the view that's won leaves out as much as scien-

tism does. Scientism deprives judgement and good sense of their basis and therefore eventually their authority. The problem is not merely theoretical. The limited resources on which scientism can draw mean that it must base decisions on default assumptions like equality. When judgement and good sense come into conflict with those assumptions they're abandoned. You can see the results in things like PC and "zero tolerance." No matter how stupid people think they are, they can't get rid of them. They're based on equality and can't be questioned. That should be a sign visible to everyone that something has gone wrong in the way people are thinking about things.

Such signs can be multiplied. They include the coarseness of modern culture, the ugliness and inhumanity of modern architecture, the irrationalism of a great deal of academic thought, the narrowness of many apologists for modern science, the abusiveness of discussion relating to religion and traditional morality, and the growing censorship, which here in Europe is backed by fines and jail sentences.

## **5.2 Begin at home**

So how can we put things back on track? We should work from the inside out: convert ourselves, and then the world.

### **5.2.1 Personal life**

Philosophical arguments are necessary and good, but they won't save us, and they won't be effective with many people unless they become part of a concrete way of life that works. So in addition to all the intellectual battles we must build a better way of life.

That starts with each of us. The reconstruction of Catholic order includes things as simple as trying to live rightly and well, and going to confession and trying again when we fall short. We build a Catholic revival by living like Catholics every way possible.

In particular, we need prayer and fasting. Modern thought makes human knowledge self-contained, and human satisfactions the sole goal of action. Prayer and fasting are a denial that we are self-contained or that our satisfaction is the purpose of our lives.

We cannot get beyond modernity—we cannot restore a true relation to the true and the good—without them.

### **5.2.2 Education**

Personal transformation is of course intellectual as well as moral. It matters how we form our minds. Plato suggests mathematics for that purpose, a suggestion supported by David Berlinski's account at this conference of the reluctance of mathematicians to accept scientific materialism. Mathematics, after all, deals with non-material entities that have observable effects in the world around us. From a Catholic point of view, what's not to like?

Another point Plato emphasizes is the importance of beauty. Beauty attracts and sustains. It knits the world together by connecting it to something above physical fact. It gives us an immediate perception of the presence of something transcendent in the world around us. As such, it is an image of the Incarnation.

Catholics have more right than anyone to that perception and image. When they have it, and their faith becomes beautiful, it becomes visibly what it is. When Catholics lack a sense of beauty their faith can seem less an absorbing way of life that discloses the reality of things than one pursuit or faction among others, and so a matter of rules, team spirit, and not much else.

You can't force beauty. It has nothing to do with what we want or how to get it. You have to wait on it and let it be what it is. You can recognize it, understand its value, and take it seriously. You can also adopt a view of reason—of reality and how we grasp it—that gives beauty the importance it deserves. The contemplation of beauty draws us toward such a view.

Technological modernity knows nothing of beauty. That's an important weak point. On the scientific view, beauty is just a matter of taste or preference. Pushpin<sup>5</sup> is as good as poetry. On a larger view that recognizes the importance of qualitative issues and what can't be measured or even articulated, beauty reveals how things are. It's not an add-on. It reveals an additional dimension

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<sup>5</sup>See <http://www.mail-archive.com/lace-chat@arachne.com/msg05679.html> for an account of the game.

to the world that is part of its true nature. Once again, we need to emphasize and make our own a broader view of reason, and use that view to turn the world around—our own world as well as that of others. Beauty is an incentive to that transformation.

### **5.3 Catholic communities**

Our efforts cannot be merely individual. Our life as Catholics is essentially social. To be Catholic is to be part of the Church. In addition, our surroundings affect us, and sometimes they don't leave us alone. Little Greek boys used to grow up knowing Homer. I grew up knowing cigarette jingles, because that's what was around me. So in addition to trying to be Catholic ourselves, we have to build Catholic communities pervaded by Catholic sensibilities and understandings.

#### **5.3.1 The imperialism of modernity**

That creates special problems today. The greatest strength of the current order—a strength that enables it to maintain itself with minimal use of overt force—is its ability to destroy all order other than that established by markets and bureaucracies. It paralyzes its victims before it devours them.

1. The development of the social services state has radically undercut the function of local institutions and networks of mutual assistance.<sup>6</sup>
2. In particular, it has absorbed or at least thoroughly colonized education and the rearing of children, which are becoming ever more professionalized and socialized.
3. Its conception of human rights and nondiscrimination establishes a pervasive regulatory network that makes it all but impossible for institutions of any size to be anything but liberal.

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<sup>6</sup>See Allan Carlson's writings.

4. Multiculturalism, together with “tolerance” and “inclusiveness” as ideologized absolutes, have rendered informal social standards nonfunctional.
5. More particularly, feminism and gay rights have deprived the family of specific purpose and structure. It no longer exists as a publicly-recognized institution.
6. What the state begins technology and commerce finish—or *vice versa*. Electronic entertainment, fast food, and the automobile replace family life. TV and the Internet make every point on earth equally present to every other point and so abolish privacy, particularity, and settled connections. And pop culture and advertising propagandize self-indulgence and consumerism as the highest goods.

### **5.3.2 A place to stand**

Catholics today seem to have a choice among assimilation, individualized religion, sectarianism, and world conquest.

World conquest can't be counted on. Sectarianism seems the least bad of the other possibilities. Assimilated or radically individualized Catholicism is nothing much, and something is better than nothing.

So it seems that in their community life Catholics are likely to have two major tasks in the decades to come

1. Establishing a separate Catholic social and moral order, with its own institutions and *mores* within an anti-Catholic and increasingly anti-human public order. Catholics used to have that; they need to have it again.
2. Minimizing the disadvantages of such a separate order, for example intellectual isolation and inability to speak to outsiders.

On both points, the decline and corruption of what passes for our public order is likely to be very helpful. In advanced liberal theory Catholic institutions and communities should not be allowed to exist at all—they can exist only by discriminating against what is not Catholic and advanced liberal theory demands inclusiveness.

However, a corrupt and inefficient public order with a stated commitment to diversity is likely to leave some scope for their existence. And the siren song of secular intellectual and artistic life is likely to be somewhat muted in the years to come. Increasingly, secular life ain't much. The final triumph of Christianity came when paganism could no longer sustain a superior intellectual life, and the Church Fathers were the greatest intellectuals. The same could happen again.

## **6 Politics**

Catholic life has to maintain its integrity, but it can't be completely separate. It must therefore be supported by practical efforts to change the orientation of politics and social life generally. That is our duty as Catholics and as citizens.

### **6.1 The need for defense**

Liberalism is very rational in its way. It has its own logic that it's inclined to pursue without limit, because it has no place in the long run for informal restraints like common sense. That logic can lead to very strange and sometime frightening results. There have been serious proposals, for example, to treat teaching your children Christianity as child abuse.

Political involvement is therefore a necessity. Our political efforts should include

1. An attempt to change the principles on which public life is carried on, at least to the extent of making them less aggressively liberal.
2. Defense of centers of Catholic life, and so of the right of families and religious and community institutions to run their own affairs. The defense of homeschooling would be an example.
3. A defense of whatever traditional order is still present in social life generally. That would include life issues and the defense of marriage.

## **6.2 Proposing principles**

Of those goals, the most basic, and the one I will concentrate on in the time available, is the first.

To change public principles, the most important single thing is to present an alternative clearly and forcefully. We need to put modernist reason in question. To do that we must clarify our thoughts, keep them clear, and then wake others up.

People who reject religion or assimilate it to liberalism feel entitled to presume reason is on their side. Richard Dawkins and others want to call atheists “brights.” The courts overthrow traditional understandings that are as basic as recognition of marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman because (they say) there is “no rational basis” for them.

It may be difficult to convert people who take such positions. But it should at least be brought to their attention that counter-arguments exist, and if they want (as they say they want) their decisions to be based on reason they should make arguments for their views that take the counterarguments into account.

## **6.3 A new social apologetics**

To put them to that task, we have to insist on a better view of reason in every possible setting. Natural law and reason are Catholic but not only Catholic, and we should learn to present them to others. In learning how to speak to others we question our own habits and assumptions, which are often implicitly liberal and modernist, and so convert ourselves and solidify our faith.

Changing something as basic as a conception of reason does not come easy. If we preach the word in season and out of season, though, people will get used to hearing what we have to say even if it takes them a while to understand what it means. And if they do become aware of it, and the range of possibilities broadens, the discussion can truly change.

The Left has made an organized practice of attacking the established system at its weakest points. We need to do the same. The difficulty of silencing all discussion in modern society, and the stated preference for reason, present obvious opportunities. We

live in a target-rich environment with a thousand fora in which we can present views based on a version of reason at odds with the one established.

We can counter the Left's one-liners ("Freedom!" "Equality!" "Tolerance!" "Reason!") with comebacks of our own, backed by serious theories about man and the world. There should be a conscious effort among Catholics to organize for and carry on such exchanges. There's no reason the Left should always be on the attack and individual Catholics should be left each to himself to fumble around for snappy responses to sophistry.

You can tell when a question is a good one: nobody wants to listen to it. The key, I think, is to keep raising issues, until they can't be shrugged off and people start raising them on their own. The modern understanding of reason is insufficient for universal human needs. The point to push, then, is that people should consider whether the answers that understanding gives us are adequate to their actual experience of life. Rather than engaging them by accepting their stated principles, which will only give back scientism and liberalism, we should engage them by pointing out their real principles, which—as Chris Ferrara pointed out—invariably smuggle objective goods and even God back in to make their system minimally workable.

## **7 Outlook**

Things look bad. That means, however, that there's lots of room on the upside. Even today, in the world of Obama, McCain, and MTV, we can work to clarify the situation and show the way to something better. Many of those here are doing just that.

Our advantage is that the truth will out. Liberalism seems all-powerful, but it leaves out too much so it can't last forever. Victory makes it increasingly corrupt. Liberalism makes individual self-interest the ultimate reality, and leaves no basis for the sacrifices even ordinary honesty requires. For illustrations, look at news stories from Brussels.

In contrast, to live as a Catholic is also to live for others. What is social prevails over what is asocial. That's true even for a hermit

in the desert. Even on the purely natural level, people will notice if the way we live is better for its adherents and more helpful to others, and good things spread.

We should be able to do better than the liberals. It's hard to live happily or reasonably as one of them. Crude measures like surveys of reported happiness show as much. There are too many things the outlook can't deal with. The future belongs to people with children, for example, and liberalism doesn't fit well with family life. Liberals don't have children.

To put the issue in marketing terms, there's a big gap in the intellectual and lifestyle products now available. What's on offer is flashy and claims to solve all problems, but it doesn't really work. If established views don't clear the way for a good way of life, people will look for something better. If we live well ourselves, we will offer them what they need.

We can't expect fast results, but we have good reason to be confident in the ultimate outcome. It can seem like we're getting nowhere, but it's not possible to know that. Pour water into a bucket full of sand, and it looks like nothing is happening, and then the bucket overflows.

The Soviet Union looked like it was going to last forever, but didn't. The same may be true of liberalism. Basic issues can't be suppressed forever, and they can reassert themselves very quickly when the wind changes. The realization that the emperor has no clothes can be very sudden. And as Catholics we have ultimate assurance that the gates of Hell will not prevail.

The question is how we should live now, and what there will be to pick up the pieces left by the ultimate disintegration of liberalism. The fall of communism in Russia has meant mafia rule and collapse of life expectancies. I hope things don't go so badly in the liberal West, and that we can do better when the present order falls apart. Our task, as citizens as well as Catholics, is to prepare for that day. The more the issues have been thought through, and the better the available alternatives, the better things will go for ourselves and our countries.