

The banner features a dark teal background with a faint, repeating pattern of a leaf or feather. The text is centered and uses a serif font. "Archdiocese of Denver" is in a smaller, white font, while "Fall Lecture Series" is in a larger, gold-colored font.

Archdiocese of Denver
Fall Lecture Series

Greg Erlandson
Talk for Denver
Oct. 5, 2004

Recovering our Voice

Toward Rebuilding a Catholic Presence in the Public Square

I am pleased to be speaking here in Denver as president and publisher of *Our Sunday Visitor*. There is a certain historical irony in my visit. At one time in this country there were two great Catholic newspaper chains: *Our Sunday Visitor*, based in Huntington, Ind., and the *National Catholic Register*, then based here in Denver. At their peak before the Second Vatican Council, these chains together reached more than 2 million Catholic households every week.

I have the rare – perhaps unique – experience of having worked for *both* newspapers. And while the two papers have always been rivals, I am confident that Archbishop John Noll, founder of *Our Sunday Visitor*, would have appreciated the honor of Archbishop Chaput's invitation to me to speak to you this evening. I am grateful to the Archbishop for his act of journalistic ecumenism.

I have a bit of local wisdom I thought I'd share with you. It was a Colorado rancher named Monty Sheridan who declared: "There's three things that's hard to do. Make speech in front of a bunch of people, ride when you're not sober and kiss a woman when she's leaning away from you."

I never tried the second, I wouldn't tell you even if I had tried the third, and I'll let you know at the end of the evening about the first!

Bertrand Russell once said, "The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt." When it comes to talking about the tensions of being Catholic in the public square, the temptation to be cocksure is overwhelming. The past 40 years of hand-to-hand combat in both the sanctuary and the civil arena would indicate that there are many strong opinions about what has taken place in our Church and society. As a journalist and publisher who has watched these tensions from a number of unique vantage points – California, Washington D.C., Indiana and Rome – I too have my opinions about what has taken place.

Such a topic is particularly timely now, with only the third Catholic major party candidate in our history running for president, and the first who is facing significant opposition from his fellow Catholics.

When we talk about the tensions of being Catholic in the public square, we are likely to think first of the tension derived from the public square's hostility to Catholic values and teachings.

In academia, journalism, politics and the popular media, there is enough invective directed at the Church to keep the fax machines of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights overheated for years.

When we talk about protecting the unborn child, the frozen embryo in a fertility lab, homosexual marriage, divorce, contraception, or end of life issues we know that some of the ideological guardians of the public square will be outraged.

When we talk about issues of war and peace, weapons of mass destruction, the environment, the rights of labor, immigration policy and the death penalty, other ideological guardians will be similarly upset.

And in a public culture in which all truths are assumed to be relative, and spiritualities are as numerous as pop stars, when we talk about objective truth and about teachings drawn from divine revelation, we offend everyone from philosophers and scientists to The New York Times editorial board.

Now add to this the extended journalistic pummeling of the Church over the sex abuse scandal these past few years, and Catholics can be forgiven for feeling a bit like society's punching bag.

It's not surprising that Catholics who adhere to the teachings of the Magisterium on both doctrinal and social issues would feel an extraordinary amount of tension with contemporary American society. We are citizens of a country with certain values – as articulated by the courts, legislatures, and executive agencies, and propagated by the media – that are significantly out of whack with what our Church teaches.

It doesn't take a pollster, however, to realize that for many Catholics, the primary source of their tension stems not from the public square but their own Catholicity – or lack of it. In other words, the source of tension is not derived from their attempts to occupy the public square, but from the extent to which the public square occupies them.

The culture has made its home in most of us. We listen to its music. We see its movies. We read its best sellers. We are inundated by the culture's values at the checkout aisle, on the Internet, on network and cable television. We

know the arguments counter to Catholic teaching better than we know the teachings themselves, because we are being evangelized weekly by Will & Grace, Sex and the City, Friends, The Bachelor and The Bachelorette. Nor should we forget Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, Al Franken, Oprah, Dr. Phil, Fox News and CNN.

Catholics draw most of their information *even about the Church* not from self-consciously Catholic sources, but from secular ones. One footnote on the shrinking role that the Catholic media itself plays in the continuing education of America's Catholics: Those two million-circulation newspaper chains I mentioned at the beginning of my talk: Today Our Sunday Visitor and the National Catholic Register together barely reach 100,000 households.

Is it, then, any wonder, that when it comes to the most dramatic issues of the day – abortion, same sex unions, embryonic stem cell research, the death penalty, the clergy sex crisis, war, aid to the poor – Catholics are more likely to judge the Church by the world's values than vice versa? And can it be a surprise that many Catholics are more at ease following *Evangelium Oprah* than *Evangelium Vitae*?

A recent Pew poll reported that 72 percent of Catholics disagree with those bishops who would deny Communion to Catholic politicians whose public position on abortion contradicts Church teaching. The same poll found that three quarters of Catholics don't consider the gay marriage issue to be very important, and 55 percent actually support embryonic stem cell research.

Demographic surveys also show that Catholics' behavior is way out of step with Catholic beliefs. In the past four decades, Mass attendance has plummeted as have other sacramental practices. Catholic rates for abortion, birth control usage, premarital sex and divorce are virtually the same as for the general population. Overall, the ability to articulate Catholic values has declined, while the willingness to support positions contradicting those values has increased.

It should come as little surprise then, that pollster John Zogby reported earlier this year that there was no longer a significant Catholic vote. Catholics, he said, may vote as ethnics. They may vote as blue collar or white collar. They most definitely vote according to party affiliation. But they are not self-consciously voting as Catholics. The Catholic voter has gone AWOL, and this absence itself is only a symptom of a greater problem.

The first crisis of contemporary Catholicism is not scandals or shortages or voting blocs, but a fundamental loss of Catholic identity.

We as Catholics are being aggressively evangelized by a culture that has values distinctly different from ours and far more effective means of communicating those values in attractive and seductive ways. We hear the sirens' song, but we are no longer lashed to the mast of our own firm beliefs.

So how did we get to this place? What has happened to the Catholic populace in this country? As our immigrant Catholic Church has moved to the mainstream, has it become just another Christian denomination, with its unique – and uniquely non-American – beliefs and features erased in the great American melting pot? Have we given up being counter cultural now that we have a seat at the counter?

At one time, we were an immigrant Church with a strong sense of identity. We lived in a Catholic ghetto, a kind of parallel universe to America's Protestant-dominated mainstream. We created a huge school system staffed by armies of women Religious who educated the children of these immigrants. We had a host of organizations and guilds that reinforced and encouraged a Catholic presence and identity in the workplace.

Launching forth from this ghetto, we came to dominate many of the labor unions and to shape the social legislation of much of the 20th century. Over time we became a powerful presence in the Democratic Party. We had the Legion of Decency to enforce Catholic moral values in entertainment. We had those millions of Catholic newspaper readers. Indeed, one might argue that the period of U.S. Catholic history between 1920 and 1960 was a golden age for the Catholic laity in terms of identity and involvement.

Yet if this was a pinnacle of Catholic society, then the question is why did it collapse so quickly? The temptation to idealize this pre-Vatican II period misses the larger trend. The ghetto was always a means to an end. Our goal was to assimilate into, and be accepted by, the dominant culture. Our guilds and organizations reinforced our identity while at the same time proving that we could fully function as Catholic professionals and Catholic citizens in the larger society.

Our Sunday Visitor newspaper, founded in 1912 to defend the Church from attacks by anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic forces, is a case in point. On the one hand, it was a faith formation tool that reinforced our unique religious

identity as Catholics. On the other, it repeatedly stressed that Catholics were just as patriotic as other Americans.

As a 1927 editorial phrased it, “An unbroken record of a century and a half of Catholic patriotism should by this time lay low this ghost of political bigotry” that was reignited by the candidacy of Al Smith for President. The editorial ended by quoting these soaring words of Archbishop John Ireland: “My religious faith is that of the Catholic Church – Catholicism, integral and unalloyed, unswerving and soul-swaying – the Catholicism, if I am to put it into more positive and concrete form, taught by the supreme chieftain of the Catholic Church, the Bishop and Pope of Rome. My civil and political faith is that of the republic of the United States – Americanism, purest and brightest, yielding in strength and loyalty to the Americanism of none other American, surpassed in spirit of obedience and sacrifice by none other citizen, none other soldier, sworn to uphold in peace and in war America’s Star Spangled Banner.”

Catholic Americans wanted to be fully accepted as equal partners in the national enterprise. We wanted our place in the public square. Even so, there were those Catholics who opposed Archbishop Ireland’s unalloyed enthusiasm, warning that assimilation could come to mean accommodation.

“Our love for the country must not in any way blind us to errors which are serious,” warned one of Ireland’s opponents in what came to be known as the “Americanist controversy.”

Though not evident to all at first, the declining religious identity in the Protestant mainline denominations in the ’30s, ’40s and ’50s was a harbinger of what was to come. At the time, however, the drive to assimilate and be accepted, as well as the impact of two world wars and the battle with international Communism, dwarfed any concerns about a loss of religious identity.

The saga of Catholic assimilation is ongoing – in the Hispanic and Southeast Asian communities now, for example. But for most Catholics it concluded in the 1960s with the election of President John F. Kennedy and the Second Vatican Council.

And yet at that very moment in history came a kind of ideological “perfect storm” in the clash of secular and religious cultures over such issues as human sexuality, feminism, theological speculation and the significance for traditional religious beliefs of a century’s worth of scientific discoveries and theories.

The whole world was watching as Catholics suddenly rebelled, dissented, argued and divided. It was a cultural supernova, a period of immense vitality and energy. But what many thought at the time was the birth of a new age was really the dying of an old age. The Catholic ghetto blew itself up. Or more appropriately, we shed that skin, and we were ready to take our place at the American cultural smorgasbord for burgers on Friday.

In the 40 years since the Second Vatican Council, American Catholics in many ways have resembled 19th century Victorians, who Matthew Arnold described as “wandering between two worlds, one dead,/ The other powerless to be born.”

The velocity of change, the erosion of effective catechesis, and most importantly the triumph of contemporary American cultural values have fragmented our Church and its people.

The chief crisis facing the Catholic Church in this country – robust as it may appear in comparison to the comatose Churches in Western Europe – is fundamentally a confusion about our own identity and what it is that defines

us as Catholics. We don't know who we are because we have done such a good job of becoming what we were not.

This confusion is most evident in the current controversy over pro-abortion Catholic politicians and the Eucharist. What is striking about the current controversy is that there is so much Catholic ignorance about the entire topic. Can this be so surprising, however, when for more than three decades Catholic politicians – and for that matter, Catholics in general – have been relatively unchallenged in any serious way about the discrepancies between their supposed personal beliefs and their public actions.

Indeed, it was two decades ago when then-Gov. Mario Cuomo delivered his pivotal speech at the University of Notre Dame outlining his arguments for being able to support even the public funding of abortion while maintaining that he was fully within his rights as a Catholic to do so.

From the grand, if misleading eloquence of Cuomo, we have descended 20 years later to Sen. John Kerry's attempt to articulate the same position in an interview in *The New York Times*: "My oath is to uphold the Constitution of the United States in my public life. My oath privately between me and God was defined by the Catholic Church by Pius XXIII, and Pope Paul VI in the

Vatican II, which allows for freedom of conscience for Catholics with respect to these choices.”

Beyond the grammatical and theological embarrassments of this statement, I think it actually does a rather good job of summing up what many Catholics seem to believe: That back in the 1960s, some Pope and some bishops decided that Catholics could pretty much do what they want to do, so long as they think it's OK to do it.

This impoverished understanding of conscience, this impoverished understanding of what is expected of Catholics when the civil state approves that which the Church teaches is immoral – be it slavery or genocide or the killing of the unborn, the weak and the old – is matched by an equally impoverished understanding of what the Eucharist signifies. As one priest told me, for 40 years we have not catechized Catholics about what proper reception of the Eucharist consists of. Is it any wonder that now so many can only understand the current debate as a political matter: The bishops want George W. Bush elected, so they will deny Sen. Kerry the Eucharist.

The intellectual muddle that has led us to this state of affairs is why I view the current crisis as an opportunity. I would even say that the issue of who

will win the White House or be elected to any legislative office is less important for the Church than whether it will address the confusion that now exists about being Catholic and American.

And if this moment is seized – not to make a political point or to press a legislative agenda, but to recall our Church from its crisis of identity and belief – then it will have been a watershed moment.

When American Catholic historians finally write the chapter on the U.S. Church's troubled sojourn through the late 20th century, they may well note that it was not birth control or the nuclear freeze movement, clergy scandals or the erosion of the Catholic family that brought all the differing stresses within the Church to a head, but rather the Eucharist, that which we profess to believe is the “source and summit” of our Christian life.

And it is my hope that when this chapter is written, it will recount that while the controversy was provoked by the contradictions between the professed personal beliefs and public advocacy of a Catholic presidential nominee, it soon led to a new awareness that if Catholic Americans are to live their faith fully in the public square, then they must understand and embrace the

centrality of their faith and live it every day, not just paying lip service to it on Sundays, or treating its liturgy and tenets like so much ethnic nostalgia.

In Vatican II's "The Church in the Modern World," the council fathers warned, "One of the gravest errors of our time is the dichotomy between the faith which many profess and the practice of their daily lives."

Cardinal Newman 100 years earlier was blunter still: "The Christian world, so called, what is it practically but a witness for Satan rather than a witness for Christ? ...Let us ever remember that all who follow God with but a half heart, strengthen the hand of His enemies, give cause of exultation to wicked men, perplex inquirers after truth, and bring reproach upon their Savior's name."

In contemporary American society, a half-hearted witness is no witness at all. There is no room in this society for a "cultural Catholic," because unlike Europe, America has no national Catholic culture to reinforce that vestigial identity. I recall, for example, my Italian language teacher in Rome, a young Communist named Tiziana. Tiziana knew more about Catholic history and thought than probably 98 percent of American Catholics. She knew it – even though she herself was not Catholic – because it was such an integral part of

Italian history, social thought and culture. Catholics in America, on the other hand, do not operate with such a cultural safety net.

Without such a net, then, our identity as Catholics is much more dependent upon our belief and practice as Catholics. Yet the inescapable conclusion is that we are reaping the fruits of a catechetical crisis predicted more than a century ago by Cardinal Newman:

“It is not that you will at once reject Catholicism,” he warned, “but you will measure and proportion it by an earthly standard. You will throw its highest and most momentous disclosures into the background, you will deny its principles, explain away its doctrines, rearrange its precepts, and make light of its practices even while you profess it... Let this spirit be freely evolved out of that philosophical condition of mind...and it is impossible but, first indifference, then laxity of belief, then even heresy will be the successive results.”

In a remarkable essay in the April 9 issue of *Commonweal*, John Cavadini, the chair of Notre Dame’s theology department, described the dark fruits of this catechetical crisis, the “religious illiteracy of so many otherwise well-educated young Catholics” that he sees at Notre Dame and other Catholic

colleges. “This vast ignorance,” he wrote, “is not just a question of missing bits of information, retinal holes marring an otherwise excellent field of vision. It is something more like a retinal detachment, a whole field of vision pulling inexorably away toward blindness. Not only are the words gone, the bits of information, but the system in which the words made sense is fading.”

In this vacuum of content, even the ignorant grow resentful. At Purdue University a few years ago, a famous Jesuit author of a book on how one can dissent from the teachings of the Church and still be a good Catholic gave his lecture to an increasingly restless room of undergraduates. At the end of his talk, a student stood up and said, “You keep telling us we can dissent, but we don’t know what we are dissenting from!”

This confusion or ignorance about what we profess to believe as Catholics extends beyond today’s college students, however. For too many of us, we have substituted the agendas of political parties or pop psychologists for the content of the faith, and we make our decisions based on these literally non-Catholic alternatives.

That is why I say that the greatest tension in the public square does not concern society's criticism of Catholic beliefs and teachings. The greatest tension comes from Catholics' inability to articulate their own beliefs and respond to the challenges posed by society. There is no dialogue, in other words, because we can't hold up our side of the conversation.

If the Church is to rise to the challenges of the 21st century, it must indeed dedicate itself once again to the mission of Archbishop John Noll and a generation of Catholic journalists, teachers and pastors to "see the world through the eyes of faith."

This does not necessarily mean a return to the ghetto. It does mean the creation of a strategy of dis-assimilation to help Catholics recover an awareness that, when it comes to faith and society, we will ever be "strangers in a strange land." We will always be pilgrims. Our home is not this earthly society. We will love America's strengths and seek to address its weaknesses, but our true home is elsewhere and yet to come.

We have taken some first steps in recovering our Catholic identity and self awareness. I would argue that perhaps the greatest accomplishment of the remarkable papacy of John Paul II has been the publication of the *Catechism*

of the Catholic Church. In the past decade the Catechism has provided a doctrinal benchmark for religious education programs and materials.

There is also a noteworthy return to Catholic roots, particularly among some younger Catholics. Observers have described this as the rise of the new orthodox. Traditional texts and authors, traditional devotions like Eucharistic adoration and the rosary are all enjoying a resurgence of interest.

But there remains much work. The Church has seen a dramatic reduction in the percentage of children who attend Catholic schools over the past 40 years. The need for, and importance of, parish-based religious education programs for public school children is growing. Yet few parishes and dioceses have been able to allocate the necessary resources for these programs. Religious education leaders and teachers are generous and dedicated, but surveys show that the education levels of DREs and religion teachers are falling, and volunteer catechists who make up the bulk of parish programs are themselves often the products of the impoverished catechesis of recent decades.

Programs such as RCIA have recovered their liturgical roots in the years since the council, but they have often sacrificed the kind of rigorous training

in the faith that generations of converts once received. To read the conversion stories of Dorothy Day or Walker Percy, one can only envy the kind of instruction in the faith that was once the norm.

As for adult faith formation, while it has been declared a priority by the bishops, parish-based adult programs are spotty at best and generally serve only the most involved or the recently converted.

Educating Catholics about what the Church teaches and why must be a first priority. On a social front, the dualism between the social issues – poverty, war, racism – and the more private, individualized moral issues – abortion, the family, bioethics – needs to end. For society to understand the Gospel of Life in all of its depth, we must be able to communicate its relevance in both of these spheres. Related to these topics, Catholics must rediscover what the Church means by “freedom of conscience” and the “right formation of conscience.”

But something more than just an educational program is needed. We ourselves need to be reformed and renewed. Perhaps the best recent analysis of the needs of the 21st century Church was written by Cardinal Avery Dulles. In his April 2003 McGinley lecture on “True and False Reform in

the Church,” Cardinal Dulles diagnoses our Church’s religious illiteracy, lack of any sort of evangelizing zeal, liturgical abuses, and the immoral behavior of Catholics – both lay and clergy.

At the end of his talk, he calls for a personal renewal that he says must precede efforts to reorder existing institutions. Institutional reform, while perhaps necessary, he concludes, “is less important and fruitful in the long run than **personal reform**, which requires purification of the heart from pride, sensuality and lust for power. Where there is a humble and loving spirit, combined with firm faith and stringent self-discipline, institutional reform will be at once less urgent and easier to achieve.”

In light of Cardinal Dulles’ exhortation, the recent controversy regarding politicians and the Eucharist may be a God-given opportunity to launch a catechesis based on the Eucharist that will renew, purify and strengthen us.

It is critical that we Catholics reignite our passion for Jesus Christ, making Him the center of our lives, and this starts with a renewed appreciation of the Eucharistic miracle.

As the Pope reminds us in his recent Encyclical, Holy Communion cannot be worthily received except by persons who are in union with the Church

and free from serious sin. Forget about the politicians for a minute: This addresses all of us. Are we in union with the Church and her teachings? Are we free from serious sin? On those two questions alone, the renewal of our Church could begin.

We can no longer be cradle Catholics, or ethnic Catholics, or cultural Catholics. In this culture, we must all be converts now.

But our re-conversion is not just of the heart or of the head. We need a re-discovery and a re-proclamation of the intellectual content of the faith in a way that speaks to the hearts of modern men and women. That speaks to our hearts.

When we are renewed and transformed by the Gospel, then we will be ready to reoccupy the public square. Rather than driving us back into the ghetto, such a renewal will take us out into society where we are needed, and where we belong. There, we will not be judging the Church by the standards of the world as we so often do now. Rather, seeing the world through the eyes of faith, we will set about the work of transforming our communities.

If we can undertake this necessary task, if we can heed those men and women, those lay movements and communities, those priestly fraternities, who are even now quietly working for such a renewal, then we will, at the end of the day, be able to address every other crisis now bedeviling us.

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