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Addresses

Evangelizing our culture: Lessons from November, and lessons from St. Paul

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Let's begin with a few passages from St. Paul. They'll help us frame the ideas I want to share with you today.

Here's the first passage: "I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 9:1).

Here's the second passage: "For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth" (II Cor 13:8).

And here's the third passage: "[To false brethren] we did not yield submission, even for a moment, that the truth of the Gospel might be preserved for you" (Gal 2:5).

I chose these verses because any reflection on St. Paul's teaching -- especially if we want to shed the light of his witness on our current circumstances -- needs to anchor itself in the concept of truth. The nature of truth is vital not only to Paul's theology, but to the substance of our Catholic faith. Jesus himself did not claim to "preach" the truth but to *be* the truth.

The word "truth" shows up some 50 times in the original Greek of Paul's letters. We find it throughout his work, from the first chapter of his Letter to the Romans (1:18) to his last Letter to Titus (1:14).

Indeed to Paul, even the greatest theological virtue -- charity, the measure by which we'll all be finally judged -- is only authentic when it conforms to truth. He tells us in his famous canticle to charity that: "Love does not rejoice in wrong, but rejoices with the truth" (I Cor 13:6).

We need to focus on truth if we want to do the kind of honest assessment I was asked to do today. My job is to answer a simple question: "What do November 2008 and its aftermath teach us about the content of American culture, the state of American Catholic faith and the kind of Pauline discipleship we need today and for the future?"

Here's the answer: I think November showed us that 40 years of American Catholic complacency and poor formation are bearing exactly the fruit we should have expected. Or to put it more discreetly, the November elections confirmed a trend, rather than created a new moment, in American culture. A lot has been said - some of it warranted -- about the dramatic social change implied in electing our first African-American president; a man of a new and younger generation; a man who ran on a platform that claimed to offer a new kind of hope, a "hope we can believe in."

But the new administration has now made its first bad decisions in moral and cultural areas. This should surprise no one. And some of the same Catholic scholars and editors that once accused the bishops of cozying up to the Republicans now seem quite comfortable under the covers with the Democrats. This should *also* surprise no one. We've known the president's views on so-called "abortion rights," embryonic stem cell research and other problematic issues all along.

Some Catholics in both political parties are deeply troubled by these issues. But too many Catholics just don't really care. That's the truth of it. If they cared, our political environment would be different. If 65 million Catholics really *cared* about their faith and *cared* about what it teaches, neither

political party could ignore what we believe about justice for the poor, or the homeless, or immigrants, or the unborn child. If 65 million American Catholics really *understood* their faith, we wouldn't need to waste each other's time arguing about whether the legalized killing of an unborn child is somehow "balanced out" or excused by three other good social policies.

We'd also instinctively know that the law not only regulates; *it also teaches*. And if the law teaches that killing an innocent unborn life is sometimes acceptable, then the law must be changed.

If we learn nothing else from last November, it should be this: We need to stop over-counting our numbers, our influence, our institutions and our resources, *because they're not real*. We can't talk about following St. Paul and converting our culture until we sober up and get honest about what we've allowed ourselves to become. We need to stop lying to each other, to ourselves and to God by claiming to "personally oppose" some homicidal evil -- but then allowing it to be legal at the same time.

We've forgotten how to think; and especially how to think *as Catholics*. We have to make ourselves stupid to believe some of the things American Catholics are now expected to accept. There's nothing more empty-headed in a pluralist democracy than telling citizens to keep quiet about their beliefs. A healthy democracy requires exactly the opposite. Democracy *requires* a vigorous public struggle of convictions and ideas. And the convictions of some people always get imposed on everybody else. That's the nature of a democracy. So why should faithful Catholics play by different rules and a misguided sense of good manners?

One of the most revealing things about the 2008 campaign was the use of the word "narrative." John McCain's narrative was "hero prisoner of war turned maverick politician." Barack Obama's narrative was "underdog African-American heir to Lincoln," seasoned with a dash of the messiah. Until the economy cratered last fall, and even through Election Day, the campaign sometimes didn't seem to involve facts -- much less "truth" -- at all. It hinged instead on dueling narratives -- in other words, which candidate's story was more compelling.

The word "narrative," according to the dictionary, means "the representation in art of an event or story." In a culture shaped by the presumption that objective truth doesn't exist, what begins to matter instead is the power of a narrative - in other words, *story-telling*; the way events, personalities and sound bites, whether good or bad, speak to the heart and then get smuggled into the minds of individuals and the spirit of the public square. This is why social historian Christopher Lasch worried that American public life had become a battle of "ideological gestures" without real content.

The media scholar Neil Postman put it another way. He said that "the clearest way to see through a culture is to attend to its tools for conversation." And when he looked at today's public discourse, he found an information environment "more rightly [described as] trivial pursuit."

"Narratives" begin in the world of ideas - sometimes in the university, but just as often with marketers and the mass media. When people talk about the "mass media," they generally mean both our entertainment and our news industries. But the two industries don't really belong together. In a healthy democracy, news and entertainment should be very different creatures with very different levels of dignity.

Our nation's Founders wanted a vigorous press as a guarantee of the democratic system. Under the First Amendment, the press was granted a wide degree of liberty. In return it took on an implied duty to provide the kind of information - ultimately, the truth -- that would help citizens make informed decisions. Though unelected, the press very early in American life assumed the autonomy of a "Fourth Estate," in other words, an independent center of influence.

Of course, there's nothing intrinsically wrong with story-telling -- unless the press and other news media themselves become part of the story-telling syndicate; in other words, peddlers of narratives in which facts are not told because they're true, but rather become "true" because they're told by those who have the power to create an absorbing narrative. When that happens, we have a problem. Why? Because real power no longer rests with the people, but with those who shape the structure of our information. When Pope Benedict coined his famous term "the dictatorship of relativism," he was highlighting how the information tools of a democracy can be misused to ensure that some ideas and candidates advance, and others do not.

In thinking about the modern media environment, the great episode of Paul in the Areopagus comes

usefully to mind.

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there. Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him. And some said, "What would this babbling man say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"--because he preached Jesus and the resurrection. And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you present? For you bring some strange things to our ears; we wish to know therefore what these things mean."

Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead."

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." So Paul went out from among them. But some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them (Acts 17: 16-34).

As Paul's experience suggests, the human taste for "narratives" and the influence of relativism are not unique to our times. In some ways, these qualities were at the heart of Greek paganism.

For philosophers of Paul's time, arguing one's ideas at the Areopagus was prestigious. Nearly anything was tolerated, so long as no one claimed to have an exclusive and binding claim on the truth. In fact, an entire philosophical school existed, the Sophists, whose art consisted mainly in the ability to argue and teach nearly any idea for a price.

The Sophists would train their students in rhetorical skill by forcing them to argue all sides of an issue equally well, regardless of the issue's content. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle all had disdain for this approach, but that didn't keep Sophism from a large popular following and the patronage of public officials. These were the kinds of folks Paul met at the Areopagus: the intellectuals, the masters of ideas and semantics, those who had turned the search for truth into a professional technique, or even worse, a form of entertainment. Scripture tells us, as we just heard, that "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21). It's worth paying attention to that description. There's no mention of truth.

In contrast, Paul preaches the truth, he's mocked and despised, and his preaching is a failure, at least in the short term. The apostolic fruits of his work are meager -- a handful of converts, and only one of them, Dionysus, from among the city's "intellectuals." But Paul's failure at the Areopagus is a good lesson for the times we face now in America.

When Catholics start leading their daily lives without a hunger for something higher than their own ambitions or appetites, or with the idea that they can create their own truth and then baptize it with an appeal to personal conscience, they become, in practice, agnostics in their personal lives, and Sophists in their public lives. In fact, people who openly reject God or dismiss Christianity as obsolete are sometimes far more honest and far less discouraging than Catholics who claim to be faithful to the Church but directly reject her guidance by their words and actions.

We can all benefit from remembering the words of Paul to the lukewarm Christians of Galatia: "O

foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?" (3:1). But it would be more useful to draw some practical lessons from Paul about how to engage our culture today.

Here's the first lesson. We need to master the language of popular culture. Paul knew he was addressing a mostly urban culture. No wonder then that his examples, unlike the ones used by Jesus, are culled from urban life. He speaks about sports such as racing, boxing, the stadium, the awards (see I Thess 2:1-2; I Cor 9:24-27; Gal 2:2; Phil 2:16; Rm 9:16); commercial activities, such as purchasing, saving and cost-benefit ratios (see Phil 4:15-18; I Cor 6:20; II Cor 2:17; Gal 3:6); military metaphors, such as war, battles, shields or weapons (see I Thess 5:8; II Cor 2:14; Rom 13:12); and urban landmarks such as the theater, temples and tribunals.

Paul is very creative in his use of images, examples and metaphors. But his power isn't limited to an ingenious taste for vocabulary. He used every technical resource, tool and environment at his disposal.

In his 1990 encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II recalled Paul's work this way:

"After preaching in a number of places, St. Paul arrived in Athens, where he went to the Areopagus and proclaimed the Gospel in language appropriate to and understandable in those surroundings (cf. Acts 17:22-31). At that time the Areopagus represented the cultural center of the learned people of Athens, and today it can be taken as a symbol of the new sectors in which the Gospel must be proclaimed."

In the words of John Paul II, "The first Areopagus of the modern age is the world of communications, which is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a 'global village.' The means of social communication have become so important as to be for many the chief means of information and education, of guidance and inspiration in their behavior as individuals, families and within society at large. In particular, the younger generation is growing up in a world conditioned by the mass media."

The Pope was remarkably candid in criticizing contemporary Catholic efforts to engage this new Areopagus. And I think that his criticism, written almost 20 years ago, remains true. He said:

"This [modern, technological] Areopagus has been neglected. Generally, preference has been given [by the Church] to other means of preaching the Gospel and of Christian education, while the mass media are left to the initiative of individuals or small groups and enter into pastoral planning only in a secondary way."

"Involvement in the media," wrote John Paul, "is not meant merely to strengthen the preaching of the Gospel. There is a deeper reality involved here: Since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church's authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the 'new culture' created by modern communications. This is a complex issue, since the 'new culture' originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology." (RM, 37)

To quote again my favorite non-Catholic media scholar, Neil Postman: New information technologies "alter the structure of our interests: the things we think *about*. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop."

In his encyclical, John Paul II called on us to master the new language of an information-technology culture: not to offer yet another entertaining narrative, but to tell the truth as St. Paul did. And success needs to be measured not by short term results or popularity -- if we're faithful, we'll probably see little of either -- but in our ability to reach today's human person. Many in the crowd of the new Areopagus may drift away. A few, like Dionysius, may linger and begin to seek. But nobody will later have the excuse that, "No one explained the truth to me."

Here's the second lesson. Paul refused to fear. If "be not afraid" became John Paul II's signature motto, it's because fear is the disease of our age. And Catholics are by no means immune to it.

St. Paul wasn't afraid to bring to the Areopagus a new and profoundly radical idea. The new idea was this: that God and truth could be known through a person - Jesus Christ -- and ultimately by no

other way; and that finding this one way to truth matters eternally for each of us. Elegant, academic discussions may appeal to us as an intellectual exercise. But the only thing that finally matters is truth.

Paul was ready to pay the ultimate price - and not only through martyrdom, but with the constant, daily suffering that made him write many passages like this one from his Second Letter to the Corinthians: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (4:8-11).

What we need to take as our own is Paul's sense of urgency. If Paul felt so fiercely compelled to preach the Gospel -- whether "timely [or] untimely" -- to a *pagan* world, then how should we feel today, preaching the Gospel to an *apostate* world? Today's so-called "post-Christian" world is really nothing of the sort. There's nothing after Jesus Christ except apostasy. The ancient world had the excuse of ignorance. Our world does not.

So, we must repeat with the Apostle, "the love of Christ impels us" (II Cor 5:14). And more than ever, we should be aware that "the night is far gone; the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light" (Rom 13:12). In our nation, in our lifetimes, there's no room for tepid believers or part-time work in the vineyard.

I'll close my remarks by returning again to the words of John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio*:

"Our times are both momentous and fascinating. While on the one hand people seem to be pursuing material prosperity and to be sinking ever deeper into consumerism and materialism, on the other hand we are witnessing a desperate search for meaning, the need for an inner life."

"In secularized societies," he wrote, "the spiritual dimension of life is being sought after as an antidote to dehumanization... The Church has an immense spiritual patrimony to offer humankind, a heritage in Christ, who called himself 'the way, and the truth, and the life' . . . Here too there is an 'Areopagus' to be evangelized" (RM, 38.)

Catholics in America, at least the many good Catholics who yearn to live their faith honestly and deeply, can easily feel tempted to hopelessness. It becomes very burdensome to watch so many persons who call themselves Catholic compromise their faith and submit their hearts and consciences to the Caesars of our day.

But Pope John Paul warned us in advance against any such feelings. Like St. Paul, we know that "we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's folly is wiser than men and his weakness more powerful than men" (1 Cor 1:23-25).

We need to face this age of ours with the strength that can only come from the words of our Lord himself, worthy of any sacrifice: "In this world you will have tribulation. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).

Thanks, and God bless you.