

THE LOCUTORIUM

MONITORING MODERNITY

An interview with Fr. James V. Schall, S.J. by Boniface Endorf, O.P.



SANDRO BOTTICELLI -

A YOUNG MAN BEING INTRODUCED TO THE SEVEN LIBERAL ARTS

In Distinctiveness of Christianity (Ignatius Press, 1982) you wrote that one of the most pressing problems confronting the Church was an erosion of Christian Intelligence, a failure to trust in reason's ability to reach truth and to understand truth in a manner consonant with

Christian Revelation. What is the state of this problem two decades later? Have the efforts of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI to deal with this problem borne fruit in the academy or the wider culture?

What is quite clear to me, as I have frequently said, is that Catholicism has never been intellectually stronger or culturally weaker. What is striking about the Catholic Church, especially under John Paul II and Benedict XVI, is that no political or academic leader in the world can match them either in general brilliance, dynamism, or, in the case of John Paul II, heroism. The papacy, clearly, has existed with mediocre and even bad popes. But it has not been doing this for the last century or more. What we are seeing, however, is a refusal, including among many Catholics, to come to grips with the force of Catholic intelligence.

The reason for this refusal, I think, is not primarily intellectual, but moral. In the post-Vatican II years, especially, many took their cue about intelligence from one or the other movement of modernity, at first Marxism, then ideological secularism, then simply conformity with a relativist culture. Once anyone has habituated himself to such views, once he has lived consciously the consequences of these views, his soul becomes closed to any alternative. This is especially true if he is a cleric or an academic, I think. Almost the only thing that can arouse them, as David Walsh explained in his *After Ideology*, is finally seeing and suffering the pain that the ideas themselves lead to. Not a few die unaware or unrepentant.

Christ's remark that the truth would make us free did not necessarily mean that we wanted the truth if it required the changing of our ways, especially if we have gained a reputation for views that are, at one point or another, against some basic principle of Catholicism. We often underestimate, I think, the allure of fame and the force of envy in our souls.

No doubt, as you suggest, the impact of these popes has been terrific. What we lack are equally learned bishops and priests. There is a Catholic lay intelligentsia that has established colleges, written important books, and developed websites that are often brilliant. The older, established academic institutions have been relatively unaf-

fectured by papal movements or inspirations. They are in a kind of ghetto of academic correctness that will not consider the whole hypothesis on which modernity in effect is based.”

Where could renewal of Christian intelligence arise? What role should religious orders, especially the Dominicans and Jesuits, play in such a renewal? What about Church universities?

I think that I remain a Platonist or Augustinian here. It can only arise in the souls of young men and women who are moved or called out of themselves to consider *what is*, the truth of things. John Paul II often spoke of the fate of the rich young man in the Gospels who, even having lived a good life, turned away from something higher. Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier at the University of Paris saw the same thing. I suspect our western culture is full of such “turn-aways.”

Looking at Church history from the Middle Ages, we might assume that the vanguard of this reform of soul would come from such Orders. I am very pleased to see the intellectual activity in your province of the Dominicans. You Dominicans have never had many colleges or universities to speak of. But your *studia* give you a certain freedom and independence to start anywhere there is an innovative initiative. And I think an argument can be made that the presence on college campuses of a dynamic Order that is not just pastoral can make a difference.

But ultimately, religious orders at times need renewals and are not, as such, guaranteed to last.

I am also, though cautiously, sympathetic with the online university efforts of the late Ralph McNerny as well as those of Fr. Joseph Fessio, S.J., Professor Peter Redpath, and others. I do not think this avenue is a cure-all, but it may be a significant help. After all, in online and on-other sorts of things like Kindle and iPads we have access to much of what we need. I would add that Father Robert Spitzer, S.J.’s Magis Institute is of great innovative importance, as is Jennifer Roback Morse’s Ruth Institute and Helen Hitchcock’s Women for Faith and Family.

Sometimes, within universities themselves, promising attention to the Catholic mind can occur. Professor Thomas Smith and his colleagues at Villanova do well, as do the programs at the Universities of St. Thomas in St. Paul and Houston and what Anne Carson Daly does at Belmont Abbey College. I like what many of the smaller and newer colleges that do not hesitate to call themselves Catholic are doing.

But there is a lot of empty space. The School of Philosophy at the Catholic University of America has been the most important single source of intellectual life in the Church, but I would add that Catholic University Press, Ignatius Press, and St. Augustine's Press have almost single-handedly kept before us the classical intellectual tradition of Catholicism.

Programs, institutes, and schools have to be formed but they are never enough by themselves. We need a constant flow of well-prepared young scholars and sensible teachers. I have always been struck by the effect of one or two good teachers on whole generations. I think of Francis Slade at St Francis College, Daniel Mahoney at Assumption, Russell Hittinger at the University of Tulsa, and so many others.

I would note, too, that much of Catholic intelligence today is found outside the schools. Individuals like George Weigel, Michael Novak, Tom Bethel, Kenneth Masugi, Patrick Riley, Robert Royal, Mark Henrie and others take up many projects that would never arise in the universities, or they treat them in a way that is free of many academic prejudices. And there is life in some of the seminaries—Mt. St. Mary's, the Josephinum, St. Charles, St. Thomas in Denver. Certainly *First Things* has been a force. Many of the journals are now online."

How can one best present the truths of philosophy to a skeptical culture that rejects absolute truth claims?

Your key word is 'best.' Plato is filled with young and old men who have truth presented to them but, in the end, they reject it and walk away. The premise of your question is something like that:

‘If we could present ‘the truth of philosophy’ in the right way, the skeptics would turn to absolute truth.’ The skeptics’ problem is not just intellectual, as I suggested earlier. Probably the two most successful writers to deal with this issue in recent times are C.S. Lewis and Chesterton. What they both did brilliantly, I think, was to take the premises of modern skepticism and relativism and carry them to their logical conclusions as in fact amusingly untenable. Probably the best at this type of polemic today is Hadley Arkes.

If we read much Augustine, we will be sure that people who reject absolute truth will always abound. We were never promised that the basic truths of philosophy would be accepted, even when they are well presented, perhaps especially when they are well presented. Plato said again and again that most people would look on philosophy as a waste of time or as foolish. Aristotle said that if we are brought up well, with virtue, we will see first principles more easily when we are old enough to grasp their meaning. He implied by this, I think, that if we are not well disposed to the truth, we will not accept it when it is presented to us.

In this sense, Socrates’ emphasis on ignorance as being the only cause of error needs to be modified so that there is a volitional component to our intellectual problems. We see where the logic of truth is leading us and we do not want to go there. So we turn aside to concoct some other theory to justify our actions.

Where does that leave us? We are only asked to pursue the truth, to stand for it, present it when we can. We are to be aware that it can well be rejected even if true. This concern does not mean that some ways are not better than others, some teachers or writers not more effective than others. But it does mean that every age will have its form of rejection of the truth.”

Which author from western tradition would be most effective in speaking to modern man about ancient wisdom? Whose thought would resonate particularly strongly in the modern mind and awaken it to those truths that have been forgotten?

Again, I wonder if we can assume that the modern mind will respond to any Christian initiative. We tend to think that the problem is with us, as if unbelievers are just waiting for us to come up with the right formula and they will believe. It does not work this way. There is something in the modern mind that is not eager for the truth if the truth is indeed Christian, as it is.

This is a hard saying, I suppose. It is written off as ‘arrogant’ because, it is claimed, all things are relative. They aren’t. We want to be ecumenical. We love ‘dialogue.’ The Church has never been more open to or prepared for dialogue. But no one really wants to dialogue if it means changing one’s soul. They want us to agree with them that nothing can be true. On such dubious grounds, they consider us backward if we don’t. Many of us are converted to this new relativist view, especially many Catholics in public and academic life. We underrate the power of ‘the world.’

Still, to answer your question about those in our tradition, the principal book remains Augustine’s *Confessions*. I have been rather taken with the *Apologies* of St. Justin Martyr, the first philosopher to become Christian. I have heard a bishop say that he thought his successors would spend much time in jail, martyred, or underground in this country. All the elements of a legal and probably physical persecution are now in order. Justin makes good reading in this context. I also like Irenaeus of Lyons. We no longer are willing to talk of ‘heresies.’ He is. The culture wants us to agree that every religion is equal, that all say the same thing, that it does not matter what you think or hold, as long as it is not the truth. Since the truth is the only thing worth holding, we are on a crash course. But many will fall away.”

You have written that one of Christianity’s major vocations is ‘to preserve the very possibility of the full growth of eros (Distinctiveness of Christianity, 205).’ You continue that this issue is central to Christianity’s ‘eternal struggle against the Manicheans.’ How are the current political and cultural struggles over the family and marriage a part of that ‘eternal struggle?’ How can we appropriate the strategies used by past Christians in the current debate?

Actually, this question flows from the previous one. Decades ago, I wrote a book, *Human Dignity & Human Numbers*, in which I spelled out the logic of the undermining of *eros*.

We can roughly say that 90% of the disorders in society and the consequent problems with faith come from not understanding or not following what *eros* is. The issue is called ‘Manichean’ in the classical sense that, if we separated body and soul, we could maintain that nothing we did with the body, as it were, made any difference to our souls. Thus, Manicheanism seemed like a charter of liberty. Once launched on this path, every logical step took us away from what *eros* is.

The sequence is really amazingly logical and clear. We begin by separating intercourse and childbearing. Since intercourse has no intrinsic relation to children, it is for its own sake. When it is so separated, it need not be a relation of man and woman. If children accidentally result, they are not wanted and can be disposed of.

Since childbearing is not related to intercourse between a man and woman in a stable family for the good of the child, we can proceed to “beget” or produce children outside intercourse. Children become products not of *eros*, but of scientific calculation. Science proposes that it can ‘improve’ the breeding. It can also propose producing varieties of slaves with human and non-human genes.

Children then become products of science, technology, and politics. Politics decides what ‘sort’ of a child we want to bring forth. Not the child of John and Suzie, but the ‘perfect’ child, of designer genes. And since the child is really a product of science and state policy, the government will educate them in its own image. We take literally Plato’s scheme in Book V of the *Republic*. We carry out C.S. Lewis’ *Abolition of Man* and Huxley’s *Brave New World* and hardly notice.

In this context, *eros* is left as a kind of recreation. It has no lasting tendency to *Eros* itself. A product-less *eros* is intrinsically frustrating. *Eros* loses its charms when it loses its purpose. Make no doubt of it, the only organization in the world today that defends and understands *eros* is the Church, paradoxical as it sounds.”

Do you see any signs of renewal in religious life in America? What are

the key issues any renewal of religious life must face in our current culture? How can they best be met?

One curious sign is the number of vocations that are coming from immigrant groups—Filipinos, Vietnamese, Africans, Mexicans and other Latinos. Of course, in Latin America itself, the Pentecostals seem to be having a field day converting Catholics. On the other hand, there is an amazing, quiet conversion of Pentecostal and other Protestant ministers to Catholicism. Once Pentecostals realize they have to deal with reason, the Church is the real alternative. Their major roadblock is unbelieving Catholics.

Probably the most important single step to reform is the clarity with which the Church in seminaries and schools makes it clear that homosexuals are not to be ordained. Along with this concern is the full Christological reason why women are not ordained. It has nothing to do with ‘fairness’ or ‘rights,’ but with the Incarnation and its relation to the distinction of the sexes as itself a good.

Widespread confusion on the issue of who is to be ordained has kept many a seminary empty or sparsely populated. Once the clergy seems to approve this form of life, the normal way as indicated in the previous question will reject it. Marriage and priesthood go together in their separate ways. No real marriages, no future clergy. *Eros* and *agape* meet.

At present we are very close, through government policy, to having to close our schools and hospitals and other institutions over this issue. The effort to eliminate the Church on this basis is relentless on both the national and international scale. It is something rarely faced head-on. Ironically, the sex-abuse scandals were, in fact, mostly over this issue, though that was not clear. The Church found itself caught in a dilemma: it had to pay the price for abuses rooted in homosexuality and at the same time not be accused of being against the new way of life. We allowed the issue to be framed as if it were primarily a ‘religious’ question, which, like the abortion issue, it is not.

It is sometimes said that ‘conservative’ orders or dioceses are experiencing new life. It is a misnomer. The most radical events in our culture are conversions to orthodox Catholicism and vocations to

a way of life that is neither liberal nor conservative, nor even measured by either term. It may mean a large-scale numerical decline of Catholics while souls are reoriented to a proper order. The basic issue is the fidelity of the Church to what is handed down and to what is true. Once that fidelity is put in doubt in a country, a diocese, or an order, as it would be by large-scale capitulation to the culture on these issues, no real Church will remain.

Popular narratives of contemporary Catholicism often pit a dying older 'liberal' generation against a rising young 'conservative' generation. But the struggles of the 'JPII' generation of priests and the widespread departure of youth from the faith suggests that there are some problems with that story. What do you think the major struggles facing the Church are internally and externally? How can Catholics best confront them? What pitfalls must they avoid?

Robert Royal and Father Barron remarked on the press coverage of World Youth Day in Madrid. Here we had a million-and-a-half young folks with nary a reference to it except in terms of Spanish politics or opposition to the Church. No other event in the world of that proportion could have taken place for any cause and been deliberately ignored. That is itself significant. The world chooses to ignore. A case can be made that this inattention is a good thing. Many things in fact happened in the Spirit that are not visible to the world.

On the flight to Spain, Benedict remarked: 'These World Youth Days are a sign, a cascade of light; they give visibility to the faith and to God's presence in the world, and thus create the courage to be believers. Believers often feel isolated in this world, almost lost. Here they see that they are not alone, that there is a great network of faith, a great community of believers in the world, that it is beautiful to live this universal friendship.'

Benedict XVI is not a pessimist and he is certainly not blind. He knows the score, probably more than any other public figure of our time. He also told some young nuns in Madrid: 'We see a certain 'eclipse of God' taking place, a kind of amnesia which, albeit not an outright rejection of Christianity, is nonetheless a denial of the trea-

sure of our faith, a denial that could lead to the loss of our deepest identity. In a world of relativism and mediocrity, we need that radicalism to which your consecration, as a way of belonging to the God who is loved above all things, bears witness.' It was in this talk that Benedict used the phrase 'Gospel Radicalism,' not 'Gospel Liberalism' or 'Gospel Conservatism.'

What is most important for the Church is the appointment of courageous, intelligent, savvy, and believing bishops. My sense is that the Church has been a bit lopsided in recent decades with brilliant popes but too few bishops that similarly stand out. Of course, these same popes appoint the bishops, but I think it is becoming quite clear that this governing duty is the major task of the papacy. We are going to need courageous bishops in almost every diocese.

If we look around the world, to China, to the Muslim States, to India, to Europe itself, there are few places that are any longer open to any kind of free and open missionary work. Latin America is more a Protestant mission. People talk of a third-world Christianity. There may be something to it. I suspect that Benedict thinks that the crucial struggle is over the soul of Europe. Belloc's famous "Europe is the faith" makes more sense when the popes worry about Europe's massive loss of faith.

The major 'pitfall' to be avoided is, I think, that of not standing for, making clear, and defining the truth. The truths at issue are, curiously, often those of natural philosophy and not revelation. All recent popes have understood this, from *Humani Generis*, to *Pacem in Terris*, *Humanae Vitae*, *Fides et Ratio*, *Spe Salvi*, and the "Regensburg Lecture." Chesterton was quite right. It will be the Church who last defends reason and the proposition that the grass is green and the sky is blue, that men are men and women are women. It is simply not true that the Church has not understood and responded to the major intellectual disorders of our time. As I said in the beginning, intellectual understanding is also a function of how we live and how we want to live. The central issue, in this sense, is, ironically, 'choice.' We are back at Genesis, almost literally.

To conclude briefly, I would offer one piece of advice. Read Benedict's *Jesus of Nazareth*. No reading can better give the grounds of

what we are. It is quite clear in this book that the man we know as Jesus of Nazareth is what He said He was—the Son of God. As the pope says, once we understand that God actually was man in this world, actually was God, nothing will be the same, not even His rejection.

Thanks for these questions and for letting me think about them. My answers are opinions, to be sure. I am most pleased to hear of this publication of yours. I have written in the *Angelicum* and *New Blackfriars*. It is always an honor.

Boniface Endorf entered the Order of Preachers in 2008.