

THE LOCUTORIUM

LESSONS FROM THE SCHOOL OF MANHOOD

AN INTERVIEW WITH FR. PAUL CHECK

Charles Rooney, O.P.

Father Paul Check is the rector of Saint John Fisher Seminary, the minor seminary for the Diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut. A former US Marine Corps officer and the former executive director of Courage International, Fr. Check has lived and taught in the school of manhood for nearly 40 years. After graduating from Rice University in Texas in 1981, Fr. Check served as a USMC tank officer for nine years. After two years working in the air-freight industry, he began formation for the priesthood at Saint John Fisher Seminary and later was sent to the North American College in Rome, where he completed his STB at the Gregorian University and his STL at the University of the Holy Cross. He was ordained to the priesthood for the Diocese of Bridgeport in 1997 and, at the direction of then-Bishop William Lori, established in 2002 a diocesan chapter of Courage International, a worldwide ecclesial ministry to Catholics who

experience same-sex attraction. Six years later, he was selected to be the executive director of Courage, a position in which he served until 2017, when he was reassigned by Bishop Frank Caggiano to his current position at Saint John Fisher. Fr. Check is known internationally for his work with Courage and his many talks and presentations for clergy and laity alike on the moral life and the Church's teachings on sexuality.

(This interview has been edited for clarity and length.)

Welcome, Fr. Check. It is a joy to have you with us to share your reflections on such an important and timely topic. Thank you for your time. Let's begin with a bit about your background. After graduating from college, you spent nine years in the US Marine Corps. How did you discover that calling to serve?

Well, I grew up in the DC area and in my teenage years felt stirring within me something of a patriotic impulse, I suppose according to the way Saint Thomas describes it under the fourth commandment. I attended Rice University on a Navy ROTC scholarship with a Marine Corps option, and the same day I graduated from Rice, I was commissioned as a USMC second lieutenant.

By trade, I was a tank officer. But all Marine officers are first rifle-platoon commanders. So we start out at The Basic School as a young lieutenant over five months learning how to lead a rifle platoon. Then we choose a specialty, and I went to the armor school at Fort Knox and spent a couple of tours as a tank company commander, which is as much fun as it sounds.

I was in the USMC during the Reagan era, which was a good time to be on active duty because we were between wars and there was a real pride in the Marine Corps and in the service. The Marine Corps in those days was formative because the emphasis was on helping men to become better men and to grow into manhood. I remember as a young lieutenant being told by a more senior officer

(a field-grade officer, a colonel), “Your Marines are your sons, and you should treat them that way.” That exhortation really helped me to understand my role as a lieutenant and captain in the Marines and has always stayed with me to this day. I was charged with the moral formation as well as the professional development of my men, which was rich and complex and wonderfully rewarding. I think, as I look back now on 21 years of priesthood—and if I use some Thomistic terminology here—that was the preparation of nature for grace, because I think about the priesthood in terms of spiritual fatherhood, and that moral fatherhood was key.



Fr. Paul Check

With respect to that preparation of nature for grace, what would you say were some of the key lessons in manhood that you gleaned from the experience of being trained in the Marines and then training and leading other men?

One thing that is of interest to me today is why there is such a market for self-help material, especially with regard to developing

one's personality and character. And, really, there is metaphysics in this—that is, going from potency to act. At a fundamental level, the human heart realizes the need, the desire, the obligation, the possibility of realizing one's potential. And that, in the Marine Corps, has a clear priority in the sphere of war-fighting and warrior skills, but it's also not so narrow: men want to be better men. And they are looking for a challenge, for discipline. They may complain initially, but in time things will turn around, and they'll be proud of their accomplishments.

Becoming a man is therefore a kind of achievement. It is not something that without attention and effort just happens—and I'll use this word with care—*naturally*. Sure, we get older naturally, and there is some aspect of maturation that happens naturally, but for a boy to become a man is a process of achieving, being recognized for achieving, and even, in a way, being pulled up to the next level by those who are in the level above and are watching them and encouraging them and taking a real fraternal and even fatherly interest in their masculine growth. My experience is that men who are well-led will make great sacrifices, and if they know that their leaders are alongside them or even out ahead of them—where we're supposed to be, in some regards—they'll follow, and they'll be happy.

How did the seminary differ from the Marines as a school in manhood?

Well, in the Marine Corps, you work from the outside in, and in the seminary you work from the inside out. The primacy of prayer and the spiritual life, the interior life, the union with Christ were the major differences. It's obvious that the USMC isn't built on that sort of thing, but it does have a reverence for self-knowledge, which has a certain sphere and scope. But the self-knowledge we're invited to in the Church is much more profound because it finds its locus and terminus in Christ. I've made the informal motto of our seminary Galatians 2:20, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who

lives in me,” because I’ve said to the men that I don’t want them tense or preoccupied over the word “discernment.” Rather, they just need to be attentive to the movement of grace in their lives and to develop that profound rapport—personal but, at the same time, ecclesial—with the Lord, and then the clarity about their vocation will come. That was something that, though I had been an observant Catholic, I didn’t know until I got to the seminary.

The military also helped me to understand authority very well. I don’t feel threatened by it, and I’m grateful for the fact that I am a man under authority. One of my favorite figures in the Gospels is the centurion, who of course is a Gentile and is praised by the Lord not because he builds a synagogue or is kind to the people but because he understands authority. The quote on my ordination prayer card was, “It was not you who chose me but I who chose you” (Jn 15:16).

Let’s turn now to your work with Courage. “Accompaniment” is a term that we have heard frequently in recent years and with particular respect to those who are divorced and civilly remarried and those who experience same-sex attraction. But the term seems to be deployed by some in an equivocal way so as to obfuscate the relationship—or to construct a dichotomy—between the truth of the Church’s moral doctrine and the complexities of pastoral practice. How is Courage an apostolate in accompaniment rightly understood and practiced?

We know that “in the end is our beginning.” If I want to be a priest, I need to go to seminary and study theology. Accompaniment fully understood seems to me to encompass the purpose or end or *telos*, which for us is salvation, beatitude, and the striving for a virtuous and holy life. These are the things that, of course, our Lord taught the apostles as he accompanied them; there was a plain goal and common mission, and from that arose the fraternity and brotherhood of the apostles. Jesus accompanies the two disciples on the road to Emmaus not just by walking next

to them but also in an intellectual sense and a moral sense; he is instructing them, enlightening them, clarifying things for them, and, of course, not in a coercive way because love and friendship do not admit of coercion. Those are the constitutive elements of what we're trying to do on the ground with people so that we are walking with them in the right direction.

A good principle for us is the law of gradualness—as Saint Paul says, milk before meat (see 1 Cor 3:2). We are not able to give those to whom Courage ministers everything at once, and so we walk with them along the way. Now, that is very different from gradualness of the law, which is a false concept; actions are either good or evil, objectively speaking. Subjective culpability and responsibility are another question, as we know. The direction that we're aiming for is clearly stated in our Five Goals (chastity, prayer and dedication, fellowship, support, and role modeling), but we are not insistent that someone comes in already living the goals—that's not the Gospel, not truth, not charity. On the ground, with this kind of clarity of mission and spiritual fatherhood, there is a *modus vivendi* (a way of living), a way to find common purpose. In meetings, we review the Five Goals, have a check-in period where we see how everyone is doing, and then have a teaching on one of the goals or virtues, followed by prayer—a rosary, for instance—and then some fellowship and socializing afterwards.

All of those components help in terms of strengthening Christian identity. Our goal is to help these good souls to know who they are in their human nature, who they are in relationship to Christ, and who Christ is. If we can address those fundamental questions and put aside ignorance and error, we'll be well on our way because the claims of truth will have been established. And that provides those we serve with a fraternity that is grounded in and directed toward the truth, which is profoundly edifying.

How would you define and diagnose gender ideology? From what sociological and metaphysical contingencies do you think it emerges?

Our theological definition of death is the separation of the soul from the body. I think that gender ideology seeks to separate the soul from the body in this life and to place the task of identity construction in the hands of the individual person, hence the now-commonly used verb, “self-identify.” We see, then, that the regnant heresy of our day is a resurgent gnosticism, and the myriad of moral problems that we face, especially in the area of the sixth commandment, is a particular consequence of that gnosticism.

Ideologies like gnosticism, which emphasize elite, specialized “gnosis” or knowledge, tend also to be intellectually suffocating. Consider the environment that gender ideology has caused in the social sciences today. If a researcher wants to examine the differences between men and women in anything other than a material or corporeal sense, funding will be terribly hard to come by and, worse, his job could be on the line. The only way gender ideology “allows” us to understand the differences between men and women is anatomical. This flows out of a reductive, materialist account of human nature that rejects the complementarity of the sexes in favor of total, unfettered interchangeability. Because of that, we find ourselves pervasively confused about what is authentically feminine and what is authentically masculine, both in terms of their true identities and different social roles—which, we can affirm, might vary from culture to culture but must always remain complementary to be healthy.

One common consequence of the way gender ideology overlooks the spiritual differences between men and women is the question, “why can’t women be priests?” That question is asked at the level of function, when it is truly a matter of ontology, as indicated by Genesis 1:27: “male and female he created them.” The rebellious spirit, which has its roots in the existential amnesia we inherit from the Fall, says that we are constrained by this fundamental ontological reality, that it limits our “freedom” to

shape who we are and who we can become. And it's especially hard in the United States because our idea of freedom is 25 choices on the menu or 700 channels on my television set. But to the contrary, embracing one's givenness as male or female leads to the fulfillment of the heart. The richness of the vocation to the priesthood and of romance, love, and marriage is grounded in the very complementarity of men and women.

I also think that gender ideology is, to a degree, less a problem right now of the intellect and more of the will and the passions. When we say that a man is made for a woman and a woman for a man and that a woman is a woman and a man is a man, those are what Saint Thomas or Aristotle would call self-evident principles. What do you do when self-evident principles are no longer self-evident? Syllogisms aren't always going to carry the day. In fact, I actually think that Genesis 1:27 is probably the most controversial line in Scripture right now. We do have to teach, but we also have to bear witness and have a willingness to suffer for the truth. Ultimately, the solvent for this is the Cross and suffering well lived, which will nurture the seeds of renewal.

To that point, language seems essential here, that, when we do teach, we speak correctly about the metaphysical realities at issue. Why is it so important for Catholics to distinguish between the descriptive term "same-sex attracted" and identity-constructing terms like "LGBTQ," "gay," "transgender," and the like?

I know what something is by its name. Naming does not make arbitrary distinctions but actually conveys the essence of what something is, as Adam did in the Garden. We will do a disservice, both in justice and in charity, if we mislabel things and persons. The truth, as I understand it both from the natural order and from revelation, is that the designations that tell us most about who we are are that we're human, male or female, brothers or sisters, fathers or mothers, and so forth, in the natural order, and in the supernatural order, disciples, members of the Mystical Body,

and the like. And these names reveal something of the essence of the person, who is always in relationship to someone else because we are incomplete in and of ourselves—and that takes us back to our being made in the image of the communion of persons that is the Blessed Trinity. Mislabeled someone, then, does an especially grave disservice because it traps him in a false narrative and thus leaves him a puzzle unto himself. If someone who experiences same-sex attraction misunderstands his essence as “gay” or “LGBT” or “trans,” he will be more inclined to see that as good or at least neutral, and then the instinct is to act in accordance with that essence. We enable that problem when we mislabel people.

What are your thoughts on the technical language used in the Catechism to address the subject of same-sex attraction?

I think the phrase “psychological genesis” (CCC 2357) is vitally important in the *Catechism*. People often focus on “objectively disordered” (which relates to the anthropology) or “intrinsically disordered” (which relates to the act), which are very significant for what they convey as technical terms and which, it should be noted, do not condemn persons. But the more interesting and important phrase is “psychological genesis” because it gets closer to the root of the matter: it introduces the notion of cause and effect into the discussion and locates the origin not at the level of ontology but at the level of psychology—not in the modern, Freudian sense but in the Thomistic sense.

Together, these two claims establish that there is no third kind of person, no *tertium quid* of sexual expression of human nature. They also allow us to look into the causes of same-sex attraction through the modern psychological sciences, which can be of use in pastoral ministry. In terms of identity, the difficulty often concerns the way the person understands himself or reflects upon himself, usually because something within his development that should have happened did not happen (e.g., a healthy, strong

relationship with one's father) or something that should not have happened did happen (e.g., sexual abuse).

Indeed, a son's relationship with his father throughout his upbringing and maturation—his “secure attachment,” to use technical, modern psychological language—is crucial to his growth into manhood. It is not uncommon for a man who experiences same-sex attraction to have had this lack of secure attachment to his father. And this is not to put a template on someone, but, in pastoral charity, it helps us to know what patterns exist and can affect the way people understand themselves, like the trauma of sexual abuse. This can give us a sense of when there may be a backstory that will enable us to work toward healing—not from the standpoint of moving the needle of sexual attraction from “over here” to “over there” but rather of healing, by grace, what may have been a very big wound in someone's life. That's a goal of the apostolate, striving for a restoration of anthropological integrity. These are foundational questions of human identity.

Overall, I am a strong advocate for all of the language of the *Catechism*, although I do think it inadvertently creates a class of people [in paragraph 2359, which refers to “homosexual persons”], which ought to be reconsidered. Classical moral theology speaks of actions in terms of either vice or virtue; it does not characterize persons according to accidental characteristics. The *Catechism* here inadvertently creates a *tertium quid*.

Finally, in terms of the language of “respect, compassion, and sensitivity” (CCC 2358), I have over fifteen years of experience working with an under-represented and underserved population in the Church—people who often were grievously mistreated in one form or another and in many ways still are. Compassion must always be understood as having a relationship with the truth. So, if we consider Christ's encounter with the woman caught in adultery in John 8—and we have this window in our seminary chapel—compassion undergirds the Lord's response: “neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” (Jn 8:11). It is the coming together of truth and charity. If we have only “neither do I condemn

you,” then we don’t really have compassion; we have what might be called sentimentality, and there is no fiber or attractiveness of truth. And, if we have “go and sin no more” without “neither do I condemn you,” then we’re standing with the Pharisees and the stones. We need both.

Let us shift gears to your current position as rector of Saint John Fisher Seminary. In a certain sense, one could see this assignment as an analogue to your time as an officer in the Marines, since you are leading and forming men, but now to be priests of Jesus Christ. How is forming men for the priesthood similar to forming and leading men to be good Marines?

At the beginning of Saint Paul’s second letter to Timothy, as rendered in English by one translation, Saint Paul describes fatherhood as strong, loving, and wise (2 Tim 1:7, TLB). I think that captures the heart of a good father: the strength comes from accountability and discipline and sacrifice; the lovingness from benevolence (*benevolentia*), compassion, mercy, and a proper kind of male tenderness; and then wisdom—not just gathering a lot of knowledge but wisdom, which has a moral component, too, of humility that opens the soul to deep understanding and therefore *prudentia*, how to live in the world. I believe it is my responsibility to create here an environment that reflects those things so we can build a bond of trust with a sense of respect and piety. *Pietas* is a word that doesn’t translate easily into English, in part because we think of it as Eucharistic piety or Marian piety, but I mean recapturing an idea of devotion and reverence and deep respect on both sides, father and son. And then to think a little bit, going back to our metaphysics, about realizing our potential. In Florence, at the Galleria dell’Accademia, there are four statues that Michelangelo left unfinished, and you can see that the forms are trying to emerge, to step out, as it were, from the marble. That is one metaphor for formation—we are not trying to pour someone into a mold. Michelangelo could see the form that he wanted to release

from the encumbrance of the rest of the marble. The atmosphere at Saint John Fisher Seminary is not evaluative, from my point of view; it is intended to be fatherly, and there is to be this *pietas*, and that takes time and trust and conversation and presence and thoughtfulness to establish.

Faithful obedience is also key, of course. In addition to the claim that metaphysics is the most pastoral of all the sciences, my seminarians will attest to the fact that I frequently remind them that the diocesan seminarian is in formation to be ordained for the service of the diocesan bishop, so he shouldn't think strictly in terms of parish priesthood or special ministries or anything else. If you would permit a former Marine to use a military metaphor, they are to be the light infantry who will go in response to where the bishop needs them, and if they hold to that idea and believe it, then they will never have a bad assignment; they will never be unhappy; and their priesthood will be fruitful.

How has your work in formation responded to the ongoing crisis of clerical infidelity and sexual misconduct, which seems, in large part, a failure in masculinity and spiritual paternity?

The ongoing clerical abuse crisis is ultimately a crisis of what it means to be a man and a father. One of the first retreats I gave to the men was “The Four Hoods”—spiritual childhood, Christian brotherhood, Christian manhood, and spiritual fatherhood. I was trying to go after each of these foundational pieces of identity so that we could work toward deeper self-knowledge. When a man looks to the great cosmic narrative, the story of salvation history, he is able to discover his identity by understanding the larger story into which he fits. In the one sense, that's a simple idea, but it's also very rich, and if he is encumbered by confusion about his own identity as he enters seminary, we have to tackle that before we can really begin to open up the questions of the moral imagination.

I likewise love the line from Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can

understand it?” Of course, that’s not the last word—the Sacred Heart is the last word—but the prophet’s insight is that the legacy of original sin has left us confused about who we are, since the heart is the center of the person. Thus, a lot of the work of formation, whether in the family or Marine Corps or the novitiate or the seminary, is about unwinding, untangling those threads and helping that person to set out on the right road with the tools that are necessary. I love that work and that project, and this is a tremendous blessing in my life and my priesthood. I really want to be at the service of the good men who are here.

Finally, what specific resources would you encourage young men and seminarians to read and review for formation and encouragement in Christian manhood?

Besides *Dominicana*?! I would recommend *Death Comes to the Archbishop* by Willa Cather, Alfred Lansing’s *Endurance*, which is about Shackleton’s expedition to the Antarctic, and *Saints of the American Wilderness*, a story of the North American martyrs. Those three were summer reading for the men at Saint John Fisher. *Brother Petroc’s Return* is a good novella about one of your confreres, and Patricia Snow’s essays in *First Things* are excellent, particularly “Look at Me” and “Dismantling the Cross.” She recently spoke at the seminary.

I had the seminarians watch *Fences* with Denzel Washington because I think it leads to some very good discussions about what fatherhood is and how it can be distorted. Another movie I want them to watch is *Miracle*, about the 1980 USA hockey team. The great thing about that story is that the coach, Herb Brooks, did not pick the 17 best players, the 17 primadonnas. He picked the guys whom he knew he could form into a team, and it was only after they had failed and were discouraged that he finally was able to get their attention and form them into a gold medal winning team. Those are not some of the more traditional or classical things, but they are the kinds of material that I’m thinking about. *Band of Brothers*

as well, of course. Men respond to compelling icons of natural virtue in a very positive way. All of these are instruments that get the moral imagination going so that we can penetrate to a deeper level.

Bishop Olmsted's apostolic letter, "Into the Breach," which was developed into the book *Manual for Men*, is going to be this year's Christmas present for the "Fishermen" (the seminarians at Saint John Fisher). Last year, I gave them a collection of Ronald Knox's sermons. He's one of the best homilists—I would recommend the *Pastoral Sermons*. Knox is a linguist by trade, so he comes to the Scriptures from a deep understanding of the language and therefore its literary quality.

Thank you, Fr. Check, for sharing such rich thoughts.

My pleasure. *Oremus pro invicem!*

Br. Charles Rooney entered the Order of Preachers in 2017, after graduating from Duke University in 2016 and earning a master's degree in philosophy at Maynooth University, Ireland, in 2017.