

Rev. Derek Fairman

Pro-Life Talk #2

(Reading: Matthew 8:23-27)

I am presenting a sequel to the pro-life talk last year. Last year, I advocated a conciliatory tone with those who are not pro-life, or may have misunderstandings; I want to make sure that people understand that there cannot be compromise with the truth.

While the politics of pro-life causes are certainly part of the overall issue, the political situation is a symptom of the issue, but it is not the underlying issue or the root cause of the issue. That does not mean that the political situation should not be addressed; the symptoms of an issue must be addressed in addition to the root causes. The political situation has its own dynamics, but when was the last time that any of us looked to politicians to answer the moral questions of our time?

What are the underlying causes? The pro-life cause has come about because of misunderstandings and errors among religious leaders. I want to assure everyone that I am not saying this out of some sense of hatred or disparagement. I would liken the situation to someone who is driving a car. If the person driving the car is sure that the best way to a destination is their way, if someone disagrees, it is not a sign of hatred or disparagement, but the disagreement comes from someone else in the car (or maybe even outside of the car) wanting to go in the right direction.

If the road ends at a cliff ahead, and the current course is to go off the cliff, we can hardly be surprised if someone in the back seat asks what the driver is doing, or if the driver knows where he/she is going. If the driver refuses to stop or turn around, you know that someone in the car is going to try to grab the wheel before going off the cliff. This is not done out of hatred, but out of concern for the safety and survivability of everyone else in the car.

Identifying this underlying cause is not done out of hatred. Rather, this is an opportunity to stop and think about what is happening in society, and taking the time to think about which direction this society is headed. To really understand where society is headed, we must know something about how these divisions in society came about, and how we arrived at the situation in which we now find ourselves.

While I do not condone allowing children to lose their lives for the sake of dissipated living, or for a political movement, but I can at least appreciate the ways that absolute adherence to something like a dissipated lifestyle or a political movement can warp the mind into rationalizing something that is wrong. What I have had trouble understanding is how any Christian leader can support abortion, and there are Christian leaders who do. I cannot understand how someone could read the Scriptures and come away with the idea that somehow, this is what God wants.

This is just the point, though: this is not exactly about the Bible. The various criticisms concerning the Bible, which had origins in the Enlightenment and really began to take hold in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, caused some leaders to re-evaluate what they believed, and develop a different approach to finding answers to modern questions.

As an aside, the Catholic faith always understood that the written Scripture was not written in a bubble. There was an oral tradition, which lasted sometimes for many years, which then led to the written word. The Tradition is another source of revelation, so if there are criticisms of the Scripture, it can help us understand this Tradition even more, and delve more deeply into the Tradition.

What does this issue of the Bible have to do with pro-life issues? Before the twentieth century, all Christians were united in matters of moral theology. Yes, the Anglicans had separated from the Roman Catholic Church over the issue of Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon, but even the Anglicans had mixed feelings over the issue; King Edward VIII abdicated because of the disapproval from the Church of England and others over his desire to marry Wallis Simpson, a divorcee from the United States.

That unity experienced a watershed change in 1930. In its Lambeth Conferences in 1908 and 1920, the Church of England reaffirmed its stance against artificial means of birth control. In doing so, it was in perfect unison with the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox churches, and all Protestant denominations. In 1930, the Church of England changed its stance and allowed married couples to use artificial methods to regulate births. There are a variety of theories on why the Church of England did so. The London Times reported that this decision would change the course of humanity.

Pope Pius XI reaffirmed the traditional teaching of Christendom in his encyclical *Casti Connubii*, written largely in response to the Church of England's decision. Although the Roman Catholic Church and a few other denominations stood fast to the traditional teaching, many others eventually followed the Church of England's decision. During the 1958 Lambeth conference, the conference warned Anglican bishops that they must respect the consciences of those married couples who were using artificial contraception, essentially censuring bishops who were still holding to the 1908 and 1920 decisions.

This was the beginning of a more progressive approach to morality. What then took place and continues to take place is a progressive reassessment of moral statements. In the Catholic Church, this was called *Modernism*, and it was vehemently condemned by Pope St. Pius X, although it never truly disappeared. Modernism is a compromise between the Catholic faith and the tenets of modern scientific approaches to various disciplines. For some, Modernism is a way of ridding the Bible of its superstitious beliefs in miracles and supernatural phenomenon, and reducing it to the core teachings. For others, Modernism is a way of updating the Bible and its teachings.

Modernism is usually but not always wedded to the idea of progress in society. The idea that society progresses as people grow in knowledge and technology sometimes ignores the fact that often human beings use knowledge and technology for wicked intents: the development of the atomic bomb or weapons of mass destruction are obvious examples of using knowledge and technology to further evil. The two World Wars that devastated Europe are contradictions to the idea that society always progresses in its development. There is such a thing as regress.

This applies to Modernism in the following way: Modernists wanted to argue that the Church's teachings, including her dogma and moral teachings, are subject to the historical process called progress. Dogma and moral teachings must be modified to include the latest developments in understanding life and human beings, such as developments in psychology and sociology.

Modernism is not the same as moral relativism, or the idea that no moral valuations can be based on unchanging principals, because human society is constantly in flux. Modernism on the other hand can emphasize that no moral valuations, such as stealing is wrong, are ever fixed, but are always subject to further explanation and nuance. Moral relativism argues that there can never be a foundation or anything upon which to build a house, because the ground is always shifting; Modernism argues that there are foundations upon which to build a house, but that the building is never truly finished because there are always ways in which human beings can add to the house. Modernism means re-evaluating ancient beliefs considering new knowledge or technology. As mentioned, a problem in Modernism is that there is little room for belief in regression, that society could go backwards by abandoning the principles upon which it is founded.

Another problem in Modernism is how to tell the difference between legitimate progress versus a radical unnecessary change in belief. It is not true that there is no development in the beliefs of Christianity. There is development, as a child's body develops into an adult. The development is growth, not change; a baby does not change into another animal or a different being. The same is true with Christianity: the beliefs and practices develop, but they do not essentially change.

I want to share something about change written by St. Vincent of Lerins. St. Vincent of Lerins was a monk in Gaul, modern-day France, who died in the middle of the fifth century. He wrote about the difference between legitimate change versus dangerous innovation:

Is there to be no development of religion in the Church of Christ? Certainly, there is to be development and on the largest scale.

Who can be so grudging to men, so full of hate for God, as to try to prevent it? But it must truly be development of the faith, not alteration of the faith. Development

means that each thing expands to be itself, while alteration means that a thing is change from one thing to another.

The understanding, knowledge and wisdom of one and all, of individuals as well as of the whole Church, ought then to make great and vigorous progress with the passing of the ages and the centuries, but only along its own line of development, that is, with the same doctrine, the same meaning and the same import.

The religion of souls should follow the law of development of bodies. Though bodies develop and unfold their component parts with the passing of the years, they always remain what they were. There is a great difference between the flower of childhood and the maturity of age, but those who become old are the very same people who were once young. Though the condition and appearance of one and the same individual may change, it is one and the same nature, one and the same person.

The tiny members of unweaned children and the grown members of young men are still the same members. Men have the same number of limbs as children. Whatever develops at a later age was already present in seminal form; there is nothing new in old age that was not already latent in childhood.

There is no doubt, then, that the legitimate and correct rule of development, the established and wonderful order of growth, is this: in older people the fullness of years always brings to completion those members and forms that the wisdom of the Creator fashioned beforehand in their earlier years.

If, however, the human form were to turn into some shape that did not belong to its own nature, or even if something were added to the sum of its members or subtracted from it, the whole body would necessarily perish or become grotesque or at least be enfeebled. In the same way, the doctrine of the Christian religion should properly follow these laws of development, that is, by becoming firmer over the years, more ample in the course of time, more exalted as it advances in age.

In ancient times our ancestors sowed the good seed in the harvest field of the Church. It would be very wrong and unfitting if we, their descendants, were to reap, not the genuine wheat of truth but the intrusive growth of error.

On the contrary, what is right and fitting is this: there should be no inconsistency between first and last, but we should reap true doctrine from the growth of true teaching, so that when, in the course of time, those first sowings yield an increase it may flourish and be tended in our day also. (from the first instruction of St. Vincent of Lerins: Cap. 23; PL 50:667-668, translation in the Liturgy of the Hours, Volume 4, Friday of the Twenty-Seventh Week in Ordinary Time, Office of Readings, 363-364)

We might be tempted to think that the issue of development in the Christian faith has little to do with pro-life issues. However, such a view of development explains how different leaders have approached these issues. The Southern Baptist Convention called the Roe v. Wade decision a good development, and Billy Graham once dismissed the question of abortion as a Catholic problem. At the Lambeth conference in 1930, the bishops still called abortion “abhorrent” and the idea that abortion should be allowed would have likely met with firm opposition. Less than 100 years later, this has changed.

There has been a large change in attitudes. Former abortionist turned pro-life advocate Dr. Bernard Nathanson once wrote in his book *Silent Scream*,

We fed the public a line of deceit, dishonesty, a fabrication of statistics and figures. We succeeded because the time was right and the news media cooperated. We sensationalized the effects of illegal abortions, and fabricated polls which indicated that 85% of the public favored unrestricted abortion, when we knew it was only 5%. We unashamedly lied, and yet our statements were quoted [by the media] as though they had been written into law.

How could there be such a large change in society’s attitudes, from overwhelming opposition to wider tolerance? Yes, to some degree people may have believed that it was okay because 85% of other people believed it, but this cannot explain everything. People will rise against injustice, not just accept unjust laws because they are the law. Perhaps a better explanation is that there has been a change in *religious leaders’* attitudes towards abortion and other pro-life issues.

Not all change is good; genuine progress must be carefully distinguished from illegitimate change. St. Vincent of Lerins wrote what he did because he wanted to distinguish illegitimate change from true development. For the ancient fathers of the Church, an illegitimate change is a betrayal of the faith, akin to Judas’ betrayal of the Lord. For a religion, there is development, but there is also the possibility of infidelity to the core principles upon which it is founded.

If people’s attitudes in society have changed, because of the changes in attitudes among religious leaders, then it does beg the question of why religious leaders changed their attitudes. It might seem odd to have a pro-life talk on the issue of development in religion and an understanding of the Bible, but it can help us to understand why religious leaders might change their beliefs.

Any religion at the very least should be a conscience for society. Religions are more than that, but one aspect of a religion is that it can provide answers to questions regarding right and wrong. To do so, however, the religion must be true to itself, the religion must provide stability and constancy. There are plenty of things in life that change, but for society to survive it needs a skeletal structure to make sure that everything is not swept away when things change.

If the winds and water in the Gospel that we heard at the beginning are the changes that take place in society, then we can understand that the Lord Jesus is the Rock against which the winds and waves crash but do not move the Rock. We might imagine a rocky shore or a cliff against which the waves of the ocean come against the rocks or the cliff, but do not move them. We could also imagine a boat, and the winds rock the boat, the ocean waves cause a lot of concern, but they do not stand a chance against Someone who is immovable. However we might picture it, the point is that God is that Someone who is immovable, and the latest trend or crisis is not going to move God.

The point of the Catholic faith is to cling to that Rock, that immovable Someone who does not chase after the latest trends or falters under the weight of the latest crisis. Any religion needs to bring to society that immovability, that steady presence that provides stability and continuity to society.

One of problems and characteristics with illegitimate change is that sooner or later it ends up chasing the latest trends or ideas, without the help of Tradition to evaluate whether the latest trend or idea has any staying power in it. There are plenty of fads, and there are plenty of ideas that come and go, but genuinely powerful and good ideas have a way of making real change in society, for the better. It is important to note the difference.

G.K. Chesterton wrote extensively about the importance of tradition and common sense, so I direct your attention to his writings if you wish to learn more. The point is that religion is generally part of what provides stability in society, so if religious leaders ride the waves of change, rather than adhering to the Rock that provides stability, they are leading others on the wrong path, and contradicting one of the purposes of religion.

What we should think about is whether society has made progress, or has society regressed? As Sir Winston Churchill once quipped, "No matter how beautiful the strategy, you do occasionally have to look at the results." Moral theology issues can have very tangible results. Whenever we look at the family and its role in society, whenever we look at how we treat those who are disadvantaged, whenever we look at how we treat each other in general, do we see genuine development for the better?

How often I have heard someone who is Catholic objecting to the teachings of the Catholic Church with the excuse that this or that denomination approves of something. I do not think that anyone really cares about what another denomination professes as much as people use the lack of agreement among religious leaders about pro-life issues as an excuse to decide for themselves what is best. In the minds of some, the issue is "unsettled" and so therefore that justifies making up their own judgments. If this is the case, can we be surprised if we live in a divided society or country?

Many times, people can accuse the Catholic Church of being opposed to progress, or being backward, not knowing what it is talking about, or something along those lines. However, most of the criticism is not based on fact, but based on not keeping up with

others. If society is not truly progressing, but only regressing, would it not be better to avoid keeping up with others, to take another course? If some program or movement is not really producing progress, or produces mixed results, should anyone be criticized solely based on others “not catching up” or being “backwards,” whenever there is no evidence that the program or movement works for the better?

Some might point to the lack of a complete collapse in society as evidence that these issues are not that important, that somehow this is what God wants or at least does not mind. However, civilizations have decayed over time, and the moral decay can get to a point in which society can have a collapse, but little can be done at that point.

Whenever people mention “progress,” it implies that the person making progress has some idea of how things should look at the end. If you ask someone making a sculpture, “are you making progress?” and the person answers, “yes,” this assumes that the person has an idea of what the sculpture is going to be. Also, the sculptor has control over the marble. To ride a wave of change, however, going back to the water analogy, is usually not with a purpose in mind, but rather is a kind of subjection to going where the water takes you. What if the wave drops you into shark-infested waters?

I want to talk briefly about true development. To understand true development, we can examine changes in attitudes about virginity at the time of the Lord Jesus. Being childless was generally thought a curse for the ancient Israelites. This is partially because immortality was generally tied to one’s descendants. The ancient Israelites were not very clear about the survival of the soul after death. In any event, the Jews who returned from the Babylonian Exile and who continued to live among the foreign nations in the Diaspora began to rethink immortality and virginity.

The re-evaluation of immortality and the afterlife can be seen in the Books of Job, Ecclesiastes, and even some of the Psalms. These developments included a belief in a resurrection at a future date, and a final judgment. These developments would culminate in the Book of Wisdom, in which the author explains that the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God (Wisdom 3:1). Childlessness is also declared blessed (Wisdom 3:13).

There were different groups in the ancient world who practiced perpetual continence. There were the Essenes, who Pliny the Elder mentioned practiced celibacy (Hist. naturalis V, 17), and the Therapeuta, who Philo of Alexandria mentioned practiced celibacy (*De vita contemplativa* VIII, 68). Whenever the angel Gabriel came to Mary, she had decided that she would not know man (Luke 1:35). The Lord Jesus and the Apostles practiced perpetual continence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.

These developments in thought and practice about perpetual virginity in the Jewish tradition did not come about simply because the other nations believed them. These developments about the afterlife also did not come about simply because the other nations believed them. The Jewish people could look back to their own tradition to

understand more clearly what the Lord was teaching them about virginity. The higher valuation of virginity among Gentiles could be the *occasion*, but not the *cause*, of development within the Jewish tradition.

That Moses was continent while speaking with the Lord on Mt. Sinai and in the meeting tent; that the people at the base of Mt. Sinai were expected to be continent while the Lord was upon the mountain; that the Levitical priests were commanded to practice continence while serving in the Temple; that David and his men were continent while on campaign or a sacred journey: these instances could have and likely did provide a basis for later development in Jewish tradition for virginity to be honored rather than despised.

What we see in this development is that ancient examples of continence within the Scriptures could be drawn out further and more systematically to help the Jewish people to see something that was hidden, but there all along. The developments in thought could then provide a further tradition in practice.

These characteristics of development also apply to Christian dogma and its development. For instance, the Church always believed in the purity and sinlessness of Mary's soul. St. Augustine famously exempted the Lord's Mother from the universality of sin within humanity. It took clarification about the nature of original sin to then further develop the idea that the Virgin Mary was exempt from original sin, to see what had always been true but was hidden in the angel's greeting, "Hail, full of grace."

Is there a pro-life issue which has undergone a genuine development? There is the issue of the death penalty. The issue has been long debated within the Church, with some like Lactantius, Tertullian, St. Cyprian, and St. Ambrose opposed to it, while others like Pope Innocent I and St. Thomas Aquinas defended it. The Roman Catechism, or the Catechism of the Council of Trent, defended the practice in certain cases. However, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Church has more strongly argued against it, culminating in the 2018 addition to the Catechism, and its encouragement to end the practice. Dr. James Whisker wrote a book called *Capital Punishment in Western Thought*, and there are many other resources which give a history of the Church's thoughts about capital punishment.

Any true development must be based on what is already present in the Scripture and the Tradition in a hidden way. For example, the Old Testament does include the commandment to stone an adulteress; the Lord Jesus, however, when faced with the adulterous woman, asked those holding stones, "The one among you without sin may be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). We have no further to look than the Lord's own unjust sentence of death to appreciate that innocent people can be put to death unjustly. Any developments must be according to what the Lord Jesus has taught, and not just a chasing after the trends in society. Sometimes those interests coincide, but still there must be a sound basis in Scripture and Tradition.



I mentioned before about the deeper issues in our society, that political issues are a symptom rather than a cause of the division that we experience in our society. The deeper issue is not just a split from the traditional Christian values that had some drawbacks but nonetheless sustained society for centuries, as important as that is. The deeper issue is a lack of self-awareness, a decided turning away from examining the decisions that religious leaders have made to see if they are truly for the better.

I would expect that it might have been understandable at one time for Christian leaders to allow abortion whenever it was unclear when life began or so much about the origin of life was unknown. I suppose it could be understandable for religious leaders to reconsider their teachings whenever some kind of new information comes forward that can challenge those teachings. The problem is that such a process of “keeping up with progress” can be subject to misinformation or propaganda. Some have speculated that the 1930 Lambeth Conference decision regarding artificial contraception was influenced by propaganda from the eugenics movement. Dr. Bernard Nathanson admitted that abortion advocacy unashamedly fabricated statistics to push for change.

Now there is no excuse to support abortion, with the advent of sonograms and other technologies. Now that more information has emerged about the lies that were told to justify these new ways and movements, a reconsideration should be in order. Just as people have trouble admitting to a mistake, so I suspect religious leaders can fall into the same trap, especially if there is a concern about maintaining the appearance of infallibility.

As much as furthering a dissipated lifestyle or furthering a political movement is hardly an excuse to take an innocent life, refusing to even consider the possibility that one might have made a mistake, deciding an issue without the full knowledge that we have now regarding the origin of life, and other information, as an excuse to allow the death of the innocent, is just as egregious. If you make a wrong turn, is it better to turn around, or to continue to go in the wrong direction because you want to believe that you did not make a wrong turn?

Yes, some do question the Church’s teaching, or at least question why there is so much disagreement among religious leaders. This talk, I suppose, is a very long answer to that question. However, if we prefer the car analogy, someone from the back of the car needs to ask the driver if he or she knows where we are going. If we prefer the boat analogy, we need to cling to the Lord Jesus, the Rock, and pray to Him, as the Apostles prayed to Him to steady the waters.