

## **National Catholic Prayer Breakfast**

**April 7, 2006**

### **“The Dictatorship of Relativism”**

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Since I was asked to address the topic “The Dictatorship of Relativism” it behooves me to return to the original text from which that very important phrase emanated. In his homily at the mass “Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice” celebrated in St. Peter’s Archbasilica on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, spoke as follows:

“whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be “tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine”, seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires. We, however, have a different goal: the Son of God, the true man. He is the measure of true humanism.”

In the space of just a few sentences, Pope Benedict connects the dots in terms of relativism as a divorce from God and friendship with Christ, and truth as attained in the most fully human way, only within the context of this friendship. Thus, Pope Benedict takes us back to the insights of the encyclical, *Fides et Ratio* of John Paul the Great – the desire written by the Creator in every human heart for the truth and for the fullness of love, can only be satisfied in Christ.

Those among you who know me will not find it surprising that my remarks this morning express three points. First I would like to, unpack, if you will, the metaphor of the then Cardinal Ratzinger, articulated as “The Dictatorship of Relativism”. I would note that just this past January, Pope Benedict spoke of policies which promote contraception and abortion as “a dogma

of hedonism” which opens the door to the culture of death. The second comment regarding a dogma of hedonism leading to a culture of death certainly explicates the metaphor “Dictatorship of Relativism” as we shall see.

The first question we might ask as we unpack the metaphor “the Dictatorship of Relativism” is “Who are the members of the junta who govern this dictatorship?” As one who is called to Holy Orders, and thus to refrain even from the appearance of offering partisan political comments, it would be best for me to refrain from naming the key players. However, we all know that the mass media are generally accomplices to those who govern the Dictatorship of Relativism; they are generally not innocent bystanders or detached journalists who report in an objective way – willing cooperators in this dictatorship are also those who live their lives according to polling results, frequently sponsored by the mass media.

We might also ask “What are the principal enforcement mechanisms of the Dictatorship of Relativism, what weapons are contained in the arsenal of these dictators?” The first is inconsistency in civil law and practice, inconsistency being just another instance of relativism. This inconsistency is especially neuralgic because the civil law is our teacher. We have the very same individuals protesting against warrantless surveillance of possible terrorists’ activities, and then in the northwest, affirming warrantless surveillance of people’s garbage containers to ensure that no recyclables are to be found. On the one hand warrantless surveillance with regard to possible terrorism is politically incorrect while warrantless surveillance of personal garbage is politically correct. The polls determine what is politically correct and thus the same people find themselves caught in a clear inconsistency in the context of a culture which never even thinks to

question it. Polls rarely divulge information which reaches beyond the trivial and transitory but truth is neither trivial nor transitory. Those who claim otherwise promote the Dictatorship of Relativism.

A second example of this inconsistency has to do with killing of a mother who is carrying a child. In certain instances the murderer is charged with the death of two human beings, both mother and child. However, if a woman exercises her alleged reproductive rights and has an abortion, the law clearly determines that no crime of murder has been committed. Thus, a human life is precious when someone thinks it is, be it a parent or be it a civil court, and when that life is deemed not to be human or otherwise be without value, then it is expendable. This kind of gross inconsistency is not questioned in our society but is taken for granted with serenity, sad to say.

In addition to inconsistency in the civil law and practice, the second weapon in the arsenal of those who would dictate relativism to the rest of us consists in a series of linguistic redefinitions, euphemisms, and other anomalies. Language, as the philosopher Heidegger said, "is the house of being". If our language is contorted and deconstructed through euphemisms, redefinitions and other anomalies then, the being housed by language becomes indeterminate, there are no fixed meanings, that is relativism pushed to its pinnacle, nihilism itself. Allow me to take a brief excursion into these redefinitions, euphemisms, and anomalies.

In the first case, our society speaks of openness and tolerance as almost supreme virtues but to be open means precisely to be closed to the objective truth. If one would claim the existence of

objective truth, one is considered closed and arrogant, rather than open and tolerant. So go the language games. The euphemistic approach is perhaps best captured by the words “late-term abortion.” This term covers up the fact that a partially born human being is brutally murdered in the process of being born. It is always interesting to hear the commentators talk about late-term abortions, adding that these are sometimes called partial-birth abortions by anti-abortion activists. If one were to watch a video of this procedure taking place would one more likely describe it as a late-term abortion or a partial-birth abortion?

We also have the euphemism – discard, used when speaking of the fate of frozen embryos which are “superfluous” and “left-over” as part of the process of in-vitro fertilization. We never speak of the destruction of innocent human beings whose fate has become absurd and who are completely under the domination of other human beings. We say that these human beings are discarded, like the one last sticky note on our notepad that might just as soon be discarded, as we take out a fresh pad for our use. There are many language games being played. Supreme Court justices we’re told, should be uniters not dividers, when it comes to *Roe v. Wade*. How ironic, since *Roe v. Wade* has become our great source of division. Now to be a uniter means to uphold that which divided us in the first place.

Pro-choice. I’ve never heard anyone defend a pro-choice position with regard to bank robbery. The only time this expression is used without reference to what we’re pro-choice about is when the most innocent and helpless human being is at stake. Pro-choice is synonymous with pro-abortion because no one speaks of pro-choice in any other context. Pro-choice is a euphemism that causes us to forget the baby.

The word “transparency” it seems to me, is being used so that we no longer even hear the word “truth” in our public dialogue and conversation. We already have a very good word for transparency: truth and truthfulness. Why is it the agenda of some to rid our language of the usage of the word, truth? Talk about the Dictatorship of Relativism! When the term “pro-choice” won the day in our cultural, linguistic usage we temporarily lost the battle to protect the most innocent and most helpless human lives. Language games, euphemisms, redefinitions are very dangerous. We are at the point where, because of in-vitro fertilization, surrogate motherhood and what flows from that, we are no longer sure what the words “father” and “mother” mean. In some cases, there is the genetic mother, the gestational mother, and the mother who actually raises the child to adulthood. There are at least three mothers. When we move to the redefinition of marriage, as including other options than “one husband – one wife – one lifetime – with openness to children”, we find ourselves in very troubling waters indeed. The Dictatorship of Relativism gains strength from the outrageous manipulation of language, and if we are to overcome this dictatorship with true democracy, we’re going to have to regain control of the use of language so as to point to the objective truth. Certain Catholic legislators recently received a correction from our Bishops’ Conference when they attempted to promote a redefinition of primacy of conscience as a line item veto with regard to elements of the Ten Commandments and the teachings of the Church, another example of surrender to the Dictatorship of Relativism.

Let me move on to the second point which, thank God, can be made more briefly. The opposite of dictatorship is democracy. The Dictatorship of Relativism leads to secularism as a state

imposed religion. Only in the context of relativism and deconstructionalism can secularism flourish. Religions, generally, make claims to objective truth. To impose secularism as the state religion one must rule out as outrageous the concept of objective truth, which is precisely what the Dictatorship of Relativism seeks to accomplish. Opposition to the Dictatorship of Relativism involves the right relationship of church and state as taught by the Second Vatican Council and repeated by Pope Benedict XVI in his recent encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* – God is Love. The relationship between church and state involves three simple rules. First, the state is never to force anyone to practice a particular religion. Secondly, the state is never to prevent anyone from practicing a particular religion. And third, generally the state should favor the practice of religion, because religious experience includes a moral code according to which people restrain themselves so that restraint by the state becomes less necessary. Thus if the state wishes to encourage democracy and needs less to intervene in the lives of individuals, one key to this strengthening of the sphere of freedom, this strengthening of democracy, is the favoring of religion by the state. Secularism founded upon relativism and deconstructionalism, should never be imposed as a state religion.

The third and last point is, “what should our response be as we seek to protect democracy and combat the Dictatorship of Relativism?” Our response is not to seek the embodiment of distinctive Catholic convictions in civil law. We should not be seeking to pass civil laws requiring belief in the Trinity or attendance at Sunday Mass or fasting from meat during the Fridays of Lent. Our response should be to seek the embodiment of natural law in the civil law. Natural law is that law written on the human heart which can be known by every human being through reason alone. There are three propositions of the natural law that need our attention and

promotion precisely as such, that is to say, as natural law not as distinctively Christian or Catholic doctrine. The first is the existence of God. The founding documents of our country made reference to nature and to nature's God because there are a variety of ways through which reason arrives at the conclusion that the Creator God exists. There are arguments that are more experientially based, there are arguments that are more abstract, but there are valid arguments which prove the existence of God. They are arguments of philosophy or logic; they are not arguments of science. Nothing is more narrow than to claim that the only real truth is scientific truth. This claim serves the cause of relativism because scientific truth develops through paradigm change whereas objective truth does not. Objective truth is not subject to paradigm change; its substance never needs to be updated. It is good when science advances through paradigm change. But to grant the claim that scientific truth is the highest form of truth is to hand over the day to those who lead the Dictatorship of Relativism.

The second proposition of the natural law teaches us that every human being has a priceless and unique dignity. So many modern and contemporary philosophers have arrived quite apart from religious faith at the conviction that a person is an end in him or herself and never a means to an end. Persons are never to be manipulated or treated as things by other persons. To live in peace in a just society is impossible apart from the conviction arrived at by reason alone, that every person is an end in himself or herself and never to be used as a means. The third proposition of the natural law teaches us, as we reflect on the desire of every human being for social relationships and intimacy, and on human anatomy – that marriage means a one-flesh communion of “one husband – one wife – for one lifetime – with openness to children”. Artificial contraception and abortion are not behaviors which someone has a right to choose. To

be sure, one is able to choose them but there is no right to do so. One has a right to marry or not to marry. Within marriage, one has a right to acts of marital intimacy and by mutual agreement, husband and wife also have a right to refrain from those acts for a just cause. Husband and wife do not have a right to a child - a child is a human being, a human being is not a thing, people have rights to things, and they never have rights to human beings. So there is no right to a child, there is no right to abortion, there is no right to artificial contraception. There is a right to marry or not. There is a right to the acts proper to marriage. That is a scandalously brief overview of the natural law.

In closing, let me say that we must reclaim the proper use of language if we are to combat the dictatorship of relativism. Instead of hearing “pro-choice” all over the place, we need to promote the use of “natural law” all over the place or better some equivalent, that is a more catchy sound-bite. Some of you might well be gifted to articulate that sound-bite. We need to insist that the existence of God, the dignity of every human being, and the definition of marriage are not catholic curiosities that we are trying to force on the rest of the world, but the dictates of reason - of the natural law itself. Language has been used to lead us into the Dictatorship of Relativism, the dogma of hedonism, and the culture of death. But Jesus Christ is Risen from the dead and the Church is alive with the truth of Christ and the truth of the natural law. Let us live with joy and with hope, proclaiming the truth of Christ with love for all, but especially for our time and our culture, proclaiming with love and a smile the truth of the natural law.

When you and I were first created, that is, when the Lord created your soul and mine, we glimpsed, just for a moment, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And as soon as our souls

took flesh, when we were conceived in our mother's womb, because we were not immaculately conceived like our Blessed Mother but conceived as heirs of the sin of Adam, we experienced a kind of amnesia and forgetfulness of that glimpse which we have had of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When we listen to the voice of reason within us, that word, that meaning, is an echo of the Eternal Word Whom we saw and heard at the moment of the creation of our soul.

The law of reason within us when given unrestricted range cannot arrive at any other truth in the end than the truth of Jesus Christ. He is Risen, His victory is ours. The challenges are difficult but we have every reason, the reason who is Christ Himself, never to give in to discouragement. Our faith in which alone our reason finds total fulfillment, that faith is our sure victory. Thank you for listening to me. God bless you all! Praised be Jesus Christ!