

St. Paul in the Public Square

Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.

Consider this passage from St. Paul: “I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 9:1). And this one: “For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth” (2 Cor. 13:8). And one more: 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).

Any reflection on St. Paul—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 word *truth* shows up some fifty times in Paul’s letters, from the first chapter of his Letter to the Romans (Rom. 1:18) to his last Letter to Titus (Titus 1:14). Indeed, to Paul, even the greatest theological virtue—charity, the measure by which we’ll all be finally judged—is authentic only when it conforms to truth. He tells us in his famous canticle to charity, “Love does not rejoice in wrong, but rejoices with the truth” (1 Cor. 13:6).

I was recently asked, “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?” The answer, I think, must focus on the concept of truth. The November election showed us that forty years of American Catholic complacency and poor formation are bearing fruit. They confirmed a trend rather than created a new moment in American culture. Much 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 who ran on a platform that claimed to offer a new kind of hope.

But the new administration has now made its first decisions in moral and cultural areas, and the badness of those decisions should surprise no one. Some Catholics in both political parties are deeply troubled by these issues, but too many Catholics 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. If 65 million American Catholics really understood their faith, we wouldn’t need to waste one another’s time arguing whether the legalized killing of an unborn child is somehow balanced out or excused by other social policies.

If we learn nothing else from last November, it should be this: We need to stop overcounting our numbers, our influence, our institutions, and our resources, because they are not real. We cannot talk about following St. Paul and converting our culture until we sober up and admit what we’ve allowed ourselves to become. We need to stop lying to each other, to ourselves, and to God by claiming to oppose personally some homicidal evil—and allowing it to be legal at the same time.

We’ve forgotten how to think, 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 is 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 “heroic prisoner of war turned maverick politician.” Barack Obama’s narrative was “underdog African-American heir to Lincoln.” Until the economy cratered last fall, and even through election day, the campaign sometimes seemed not to involve truth at all. It hinged instead on narratives—on which candidate’s story was more compelling.

In a culture shaped by the presumption that objective truth doesn’t exist, what begins to matter instead is the power of a narrative and storytelling: the way events, personalities, and sound bites get smuggled into the minds of individuals and the spirit of the public square. This is why the 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.”

In thinking about our modern-media environment, the great episode of Paul in the Acts of the Apostles ought to come to mind: “Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him. And some said, ‘What would this babblers 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.’”

As Paul's experience suggests, the human taste for narratives and discomfort with claims to binding truth are not unique to our own time. In some ways, these qualities were at the heart of Greek paganism. For the Athenian philosophers arguing their ideas at the Areopagus, nearly anything was tolerated so long as no one claimed to have an exclusive and binding claim on the truth. These were the people Paul met at the Areopagus: the intellectuals, the masters of ideas and semantics, who had turned the search for truth into a professional technique or, worse, a form of entertainment. "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there," Acts continues, "spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new." In contrast, Paul preaches the truth, and as a result he is mocked and despised, with his preaching 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, Dionysius, 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. People who openly reject God or dismiss Christianity as obsolete are sometimes more honest and less discouraging than Catholics who claim to be faithful to the Church but directly reject her guidance by their words and actions. As Paul asked the lukewarm Christians of Galatia, "O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?"

Here is a practical lesson to draw from Paul about how to engage the culture today: We need to master the language of popular culture. Paul knew he was addressing a mostly urban culture. Most of his examples, unlike the ones used by Jesus, are culled from urban life. He speaks about sports—racing, boxing, the stadium, the awards. He mentions the commerce of purchasing, saving, and cost-benefit ratios. He employs military metaphors of wars, battles, shields, and swords. He names the urban landmarks of 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—as we must. As John Paul II put it in *Redemptoris Missio*, "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 his criticism, written almost twenty years ago, remains true: "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," John Paul wrote, "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."

To quote again 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 *Redemptoris Missio*, 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 but by 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."

There is a second practical lesson we can learn from Paul, for he refused to fear. If "Be Not Afraid" became John Paul II's motto, it is because fear is the disease of our age. And Catholics are by no means immune to it. Paul wasn't afraid to bring to the Areopagus the new and profoundly radical idea that God and truth could be known through a person—Jesus Christ—and ultimately in no other way. 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 price for his fearlessness—not only with martyrdom but with the constant, daily suffering that made him write many passages such as 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."

That we need to take as our own is Paul's sense of urgency. If Paul felt so fiercely compelled to preach the gospel 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 Paul that "the love of Christ impels us" (2 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.

John Paul II declared 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." Indeed, he added, "In secularized societies, 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."

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 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 John Paul II 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).

Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., is archbishop of Denver.