

“The Mass: Essence and Foundation of Western Civilization”
Talk for Catholic Distance University Annual Gala
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Introduction

Thank you. It is an honor for me to be here with you and to accept this recognition. We certainly have much work to do in rebuilding civilization; our faith, our values, and indeed even our civilization itself are being attacked on multiple fronts.

Truth, Beauty and Goodness

I would like then, in offering these remarks, to reflect with you on the Church’s project of building civilization, especially with the three great transcendentals of truth, beauty and goodness: the doorway to a God Who is the perfection of each. I would like especially (although not exclusively) to dwell in these reflections on the transcendental of beauty, for we are facing challenges to the very concepts of truth and goodness in our post-modern society.

Indeed, we live in an age that contests what is good, renaming even the murder of infants as a good, a debate which has now gained a new intensity since the Supreme Court returned to the people the right to decide for themselves what the laws of their state should be in regulating access to abortion. And as for truth, reason itself has become the subject of controversy. The Enlightenment believed in truth and its pursuit through reason. While a sound principle, it is incomplete, for the Enlightenment privatized faith, relegating it to a matter of private opinion rather than one of the sources with which to apprehend truth.

One of the great hallmarks of the Catholic intellectual tradition, of course, is the understanding that faith and reason must work together, each making its own unique contribution and serving as a necessary check on the other, in order to come to an understanding of the truth. After centuries of a modern world trying to understand truth on the basis of reason alone, what do we have now in the post-modern world? Neither faith nor reason is a source of truth; rather, truth itself is privatized, a matter of private opinion by which I am entitled to live and which everyone else is obliged to respect. So, in the quest for truth, the long arc of Western history has moved from faith and reason, to reason alone and not faith, to neither faith nor reason but only will to power.

With beauty, though, it’s different. While people may argue “you have your truth and I have my truth,” and may relativize even what is clearly good, there is no arguing when it comes to beauty. It touches people in an intuitive way, circumventing logical arguments (or, more often, illogic!), and so can prepare the soil of the soul for sowing the seeds of truth. And while people may intentionally turn a blind eye to all the good the Church does for the world, beauty cannot be denied when it is in front of one.

As an example: I still remain struck at how the whole world, regardless of faith affiliation or lack thereof, mourned the destruction of the great edifice to the glory and majesty of God that is the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris. I’m sure you all remember as well as I do how the whole world, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, looked on shocked and appalled as flames threatened to destroy sacred beauty. It was an uncanny moment of unity in suffering, suffering together the potential loss of an ancient beauty: the soaring beauty of

that great Cathedral which meant so much to so many over so many centuries, Catholics and non-Catholic alike. It was one of those moments of solidarity in which the sentiment was “we are all French,” for truly, Notre Dame is the physical expression of all that is great in French culture and legacy, and is the mother of every French person, even as secularized as that country has become.

The world’s response to this great tragedy shows that the language of beauty, especially classical beauty, continues to touch hearts in our troubled, divisive, anxious and uncertain time. It does so because what is classical attains that status because it has withstood the test of time: it is universal, beautiful in every age and in every culture. There is something intuitive about that, which is not subject to personal opinion or argumentation. It is, to a large extent, an untapped resource for reaching people, especially young people, with the Gospel in this deconstructed age in which we live.

Cancel Culture Nothing New

The timelessness of sacred beauty gives it the power to lift us out of the world of time and give us a glimpse of that which transcends time, of what ultimately lasts, of what our goal and our final home is: ultimately, the reality of God. A key to the path of renewal of both Church and society, then, is to recapture the importance of beauty, to recognize its universality, and its power to evangelize and open hearts to the truth.

Such beauty as that which Notre Dame Cathedral offers to the world is a brief respite in the incessant deconstruction and violence to which our society is subject nowadays, and which we all find terribly disconcerting, to put it mildly. The movements marked by these trends are often carried out by protagonists of what social commentators refer to as the “cancel culture.” Yes, we are living in an age of “cancel culture.” We are all painfully aware of this. The online “Urban Dictionary” defines “cancel culture” as:

A modern internet phenomenon where a person is ejected from influence or fame by questionable actions. It is caused by a critical mass of people who are quick to judge and slow to question. It is commonly caused by an accusation, whether that accusation has merit or not. It is a direct result of the ignorance of people caused [by] communication technologies outpacing the growth in available knowledge of a person.¹

If anyone thought that cancel culture was a new phenomenon with our time, though, such a one can stand corrected. The Church reminds us of this every year on Good Friday.

Was not our Lord ejected from influence because he posed a threat to the worldly power of the governing authorities and the leaders of his own people? Were not the people quick to judge without thinking things through, including even the scholars of the Law who should have known better? Do we not see here a growing mob mentality that erupts in violence against an innocent man? This is the story on the human level.

¹ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Cancel%20Culture>.

This, too, is the story we are seeing played out before our eyes today. What do the cancelers really want to cancel out? It is far more than those who disagree with them. The real activists are seeking to discredit the great protagonists of Western civilization, both in the history of our country and of our Church. How else can one explain the toppling of statues of such giants of our history as Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant, as happened in my own city of San Francisco? Along with them the cancelers on rampage in Golden Gate Park also tore down the statue of St. Junípero Serra (as you may know, I've been engaged in a multi-year effort to defend his legacy, and obtain restitution for the second Serra statue that was pulled down, this one on the parish property of Mission San Rafael).

The Building of a Christian Civilization

We should not be naïve, though: by trying to cancel out Western civilization, what the cancellers are really trying to cancel out is the Church. So the way there is to cancel out truth, beauty and goodness, the building blocks with which the Church built a Christian world. They certainly have gone a long way in canceling out truth (although, despite the relativists' claim that "you have your truth, I have my truth," the secular culture has its own infallible dogmas that it forces on the citizenry as their own gospel truth).

Beauty, though, is a bit harder to cancel, as witnessed, again, by the sadness of the entire world at the burning of Notre Dame de Paris, not to mention all of the other great medieval cathedrals of Europe to which people from all over the world have come for almost a millennium to admire, and to this day are reduced to silence with their timeless beauty. The Church's witness of her commitment to goodness may also be difficult to cancel out, but the promoters of the black legend have done such a good job at perpetrating myths and distortions of the Church's historical record that ignorance and hatred of the Catholic Church now dominate the secular cultural mentality (as, again, we see in the attacks against St. Junípero Serra, among very many other examples).

We do not know our own history as Catholics; we need to tell our own stories (no one else will for us!) not only in history books but also in art, literature, music, poetry, painting. The Church has done this throughout her history through her institutions and her saints. We can begin by considering what was originated as a bulwark of truth and reason working together to mine, discover and understand truth: the university. Let us recall that it was the Church that gave the world the university. The university was, indeed, born from the heart of the Church, as the opening sentence of Pope St. John Paul II's landmark Apostolic Constitution on the Catholic university makes clear and from which it takes its name (*Ex corde Ecclesiae*): "Born from the heart of the Church, a Catholic University is located in that course of tradition which may be traced back to the very origin of the University as an institution."²

This is another chapter of our history we need to teach our people. After the fall of the Roman Empire in the mid-fifth century – a total civilizational collapse – who took over to keep the flame of faith and learning alive? It was the monasteries. Monasteries were not just places of refuge for prayer and contemplation, they were also centers of study, learning,

² Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities, *Ex corde Ecclesiae*.

and handing on knowledge. People moved with their families to be close to the monasteries so they could be educated; villages began to develop around them.

As I am fond of telling young people when I celebrate Confirmation, a thousand years elapsed between the fall of the Roman Empire and the inventing of the printing press. When you are reading the Bible, or any other ancient text for that matter – that of a Greek philosopher, a Roman poet, a Father of the Church – have you ever wondered how this text that is thousands of years old has found its way into your hands when civilization collapsed and for a thousand years there was no efficient way of printing texts on a massive scale? The answer is: monasteries.

For a thousand years monks all across Europe spent their lives copying ancient texts. The monasteries even had a special writing room dedicated to this purpose, called the “scriptorium,” that took advantage of the natural light for doing so. And because the Church has always understood truth, beauty and goodness as being inter-related, the monks turned these manuscripts into works of beauty (for example, turning the “T” as the first letter on a page into a cross and depicting the scene of the Crucifixion). We call them “illuminated manuscripts,” hundreds of years old that people to this day go to museums to admire. In the High Middle Ages the Church got the idea to put all of the various branches of learning into one place: “all things,” in Latin, “*universa*.” Thus was born the *university*.

Of course, the Church has been equally attentive to evangelizing through goodness, witnessed especially in how, in her history, she organized health care into hospitals, born from her constitutive commitment of service to the sick and the poor, going back to the very beginning. In ancient Rome, when a plague would break out, anyone with the means would flee to the hills until the plague subsided and it was safe to return to the city. The Christians were the ones who famously stayed behind to care for the poor sick at great risk to their own health and even lives, and not just their own sick but all the sick. (And this commitment continues to this day: early on during the COVID lockdowns in San Francisco, it was our own Catholic Charities workers who took care of the homeless still on the streets when everyone else abandoned them.) This witness of heroic virtue is what helped convert pagan Rome to being the center of the Christian faith. And once again, it was the monasteries that stepped into the vacuum to provide health care after the collapse of the known civilization at the time. And here again, later in the Middle Ages the Church got the idea to put all of the different branches of health care into one place, where all the sick could receive hospitality. Thus was born the *hospital*.

Hospitals and the Church’s other such organized endeavors to serve the poor is “service” in the authentic Christian sense: not simply giving from what one has left over to help someone else less fortunate, but solidarity *with* the poor. This explains the flourishing of religious orders founded not only to serve the poor, but actually to *be* poor. Citizens with claims to wealth and nobility would divest themselves of such in order to be poor in service to the poor, such boasts of our history as St. Elizabeth of Hungary, St. Frances of Rome, St. Margaret of Scotland, and, the most famous of them all and patron saint of my own city, St. Francis of Assisi. The Catholic Church to this day is the largest private provider of social services in the world; in our own country, our Church is the largest private provider of health care, and the only private provider of our size with an explicit commitment to providing health care for the poor.

This is the civilization, the Christian civilization, built by the Church founded by Jesus Christ – or better yet, the civilization that the Church *rebuilt* after the fall of Rome, and rebuilt in a Christian way. And on the day that those who sought to cancel him out thought they had succeeded, we see God’s blueprint for this plan. St. John tells us in his Gospel that, when Jesus was crucified, “Pilate ... had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, ‘Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews’ ... and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek.” Here it is: the essence of the plan of Western civilization, the blueprint from which the Church would build a Christian civilization.

The Mass: Crux of Western Civilization

It begins with God’s original Chosen People. God gave them the Law, the Torah, through Moses. Not just rules and regulations to help the people get along, but the revelation of His higher truth. From this people the Church was born, to whom God gave the fullness of revelation in His Son Jesus Christ. As the Church began to fulfill the Great Commission and proclaim the Gospel throughout the known world of the time, she came more and more into contact with Greek culture.

As you may know, Greek thought and the Greek language were the dominant cultural influence in the world of the time, much like the English language and American culture are in the world of our own time. So this is the next step in building from that blueprint: Greeks being the great philosophers that they were, the early Church Fathers, especially the Greek Fathers, understood how to translate Semitic thought into categories of Greek philosophy in order to bring the Gentiles to salvation in Christ.

Then, when Rome became Christian, the Church was able to avail herself of the physical and social infrastructure of the Roman Empire that had spread all throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Thus the third stop: the roads and law and governing models of the Roman Empire are what gave the Church the infrastructure she needed to build a common Christian community all throughout the world. And, obviously, we have also inherited the inestimable blessing of the great Latin Fathers of the Church.

Now, where does all of this come together in our everyday experience as Catholics: truth, beauty and goodness; Latin, Hebrew and Greek? It comes together, traditionally speaking at least, in the Mass: there at the Mass we have the Bible, the Church’s Magisterium through her Tradition, art, music, architecture, poetry, and poetry in motion in the form of ceremony. And, we have Latin, Hebrew and Greek. Notice how the Church has always been careful to preserve something of the previous official language of prayer in those rare occasions when that language changed.

So, the first Christians prayed in Hebrew, because they were Jewish. But, with the success of the evangelization of the Gentiles, the language of prayer changed to Greek already within the first generation. However, in her liturgy the Church held onto the traces of her first language, as she does to this day: Amen, Alleluia, Hosanna and Sabbaoth (when the *Sanctus* is sung in Latin). About two hundred years later, when the Church in Rome

started to celebrate the Mass in Latin, the Christians there still retained some Greek words – *Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison* – in addition to continuing to hold onto the Hebrew words.³

It is thus that the Mass encapsulates all of Western civilization; it is the distilled essence of that civilization, of which it was the prime force in building. It brings together truth, beauty and goodness all in one place.

Canceling Sin

Jerusalem, Athens and Rome; Hebrew, Greek and Latin: these are the building blocks of a great Christian civilization. And we have all of the elements of Western civilization at the Mass, the distilled essence of that civilization, represented by the sign Pilate had placed at the top of the Cross. However, to see the most distilled essence of all, what truly is at the heart of it all, and must be at the heart of Catholic life in all of its forms (institutional, parish, family life, etc.), we must look below the inscription; if we fail to do that, it will all be simply a façade. Pilate said, “Behold, your king.” We need to gaze upon Christ on the Cross, and truly behold our King, the one who gave everything for us, even though he had no need to receive anything from us. Jesus himself – not *only* his teaching, but he, in his death on the Cross – is the blueprint for a civilization of truth and love, a civilization imbued with a Christian ethos.

The drive to cancel this out, then, ultimately is the attempt to cancel out the founder of the Church, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This really, though, is nothing more than the old and ugly tendency toward sin, a tendency that affects all of us in our human weakness. All of us, in some way and to some extent, are with the crowds in the story: instead of beholding our King, we claim, “We have no king but Cesar.” It is our sins that, with the crowd, shout out, “Crucify him!” No, there is nothing new about this. We are back in the Garden of Eden at the time of the fall: it is the attempt to cancel out God, in order to do things our own way.

There is, though, one cancel culture our Lord did come to establish: canceling out sin. He has done that on the Cross, paying the debt we owed to God but which we could not pay ourselves. Since it was man who incurred the debt, man had to pay it back. So that is the one thing the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity did need to receive from us, a human nature, so, as man, he could pay back what we could not without his divine nature. But he only “needed” this because he condescended to come to our rescue, not because he stood to get anything out of it for himself.

That is the Good News, and the pattern for how the human person lives in accordance with the original human dignity that God gave us. But someone needs to tell this to the world, to open deaf ears and break through the cacophony of post-modern cancel culture so the message can get through and penetrate hearts and take root there. If not us, then who? It takes committed, faithful and knowledgeable Catholics to bear witness to this Good News

³ Since after Vatican II the Church decided – despite *Sacrosanctum Concilium*’s admonition that “[p]articular law remaining in force, the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites” (n. 36) – the entire Mass was to be translated into the vernacular, I would have liked to see the *Kyrie* retained in Greek, and not just the Hebrew words in Hebrew (which, in my opinion, should have also applied to the word “sabbaoth”), and also some words in Latin, in order to preserve this pattern. On this last point, it would have been most appropriate to keep the dismissal at the end along with the response in Latin, as this is where the principal Catholic worship service gets the name “Mass” (*Ite Missa est/Deo gratias*).

in order to lead others there. Especially urgent is the need to accompany young people on this journey, who are so deeply immersed in cancel culture, to accompany them in journeying from darkness to light, from sin to grace, from self-centered indulgence to altruistic love, after the pattern of our Savior on his Cross. But we can only do that if we have first gone there ourselves.

And you are doing precisely that! Reaching people where they are at, using the modern means of social communication. As a university, you focus more on the transcendental of truth, but I know that beauty and goodness are also important to you, and you understand that all three together form the education of the whole person. The beauty of this very place where this event is taking place speaks to that. You proclaim the Gospel by reaching people far and wide with the truth of Christ, using the modern means of communication to do so. This is exactly what we need to be doing.

Conclusion

Yes, this is truly Good News. And not just because of what we receive, but also because of the lesson it teaches us about how we are to live together well. That comes not from looking at what one gets out of it, but rather looking to the good of the other before one's self. And only our Savior makes that possible.

It is good that we behold our King on the Cross. And it is good, too, to see in the inscription above him his plan for our living in a world in which his truth, beauty and goodness can thrive. All of this comes together in the Holy Mass and is made present there; the greatest gift of all, though, is *his* presence there. He comes to meet us in every Mass, to bring us his truth and love.

This is the civilization that leads all into the true and lasting happiness with him that he came to win for us, a civilization born from the heart of his Bride, the Church. Let us strive to make our own contribution to this civilization in our families, our parishes, and all of the communities in which we interact: to be a beacon of truth, beauty and goodness to a world weakened by error, evil and sin; to be a community of faith, hope and charity so that all may grow more perfectly into the image and likeness in which God originally created us. In thanking you for your own commitment to living out this call of our Catholic faith, I pray that He may continue to bless you and give success to the work of your hands for your own spiritual growth and that of your loved ones and fellow believers, that you may flourish here in this life and perfectly forever in heaven. May God grant us this grace. Amen.