

## The Better Angels of our Nature

I first heard the phrase which is the title of this column in the context of Ken Burn's Civil War Documentary from three decades ago. Abraham Lincoln used the phrase in his inaugural address of 1861 wherein he addressed the nation thus:

*"We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."*

A little bit of investigation into the phrase revealed that it was a well-known among mid-nineteenth century Americans. A proximate source for the phrase was a popular Dicken's novel Barnaby Rudge:

*"So do the shadows of our own desires stand between us and our better angels, and thus their brightness is eclipsed."*

The remote source for the saying is from Shakespeare's Sonnet 144:

*"Two loves I have of comfort and despair,  
Which like two spirits do suggest me still  
The better angel is a man right fair  
The worser spirit a woman colored ill"*

I dare not quote Shakespeare further since the sonnet seems rather misogynistic, (woman hating).

Dickens and Lincoln seem to use the phrase metaphorically as referring to virtues: The "better angels" are the better instincts or higher values which make for a noble and good life. And this sort of exhortation is, I think, so important for this moment in history through which we are all living. These secular figures echo the sort of teaching we find in the Holy Bible. I encourage you to read the Letter of James, Chapter 3, as an example. If you will, James sets the "better angels" of humility and wisdom against the base impulses of selfishness, boastfulness and jealousy.

This is a very valuable consciousness for us to have as Catholic Christians. Every day on cable TV news, there is an ugly battle between extremes of the political spectrum. And, what makes it particularly ugly is the cherry-picking each side will use of each other's words to impugn the other and to render the other as, seemingly, dangerous and un-American as possible. Truly, some TV pundits are

itching for nothing less than civil war in the name of some ideology.

As I have written before, we also see this in the life of the Church. Most recently, the tensions within the national conference of bishops leaked out into the medias-sphere in the question of whether Pro-Choice Catholic Politicians should be able to receive Holy Communion because their politics stand in contradiction to Church Teaching. It suggests a shameful break-down in discipline and charity that such a thing happened.

Disagreements can be extremely sharp and difficult. Even in the scriptures we witness a rupture between former co-missionaries, Paul and Barnabas, (Acts 15:36ff). This may be taken as a cautionary tale of how rigorous we must be to ensure that we are living by "the better angels of our nature!" Both national and Church unity would require this sort of rigor.

Consider the example of St. Thomas Aquinas in the manner by which he would refute the arguments of opponents. Aquinas did not create "straw men" or caricatures of his opponents: Rather, he would begin any argument by re-presenting his opponents point of view in the best possible way. In doing so, he could affirm what might be good or true. But, in all charity and fairness, he could properly refute what was in error.



What we see now, in the taking heads on both secular and religious television news programming, is not an appeal to "the better angels of our nature," but it does seem to me an appeal to very divisive populism and sectarianism. In secular terms, they are toying with the specter of Civil War, and in Church terms, the tragedy of schism. Jesus warns us, "He who does not gather with me, scatters", (Mt. 12:30) We ought to discern between those politicians and clerics who are self-serving and those who serve the common good and the flock of the Master, respectively.