

**“Building a Civilization of Truth and Love”**  
**Talk for the Kern Catholic Prayer Breakfast**  
**March 21, 2019; St. Francis of Assisi Parish, Bakersfield**

**Introduction**

A few of years ago when I went to celebrate Confirmation for a group of young people at a large, working-class Hispanic parish in our Archdiocese, I still remember being quite edified by two of the confirmandi who shared reflections on what their Confirmation meant to them. They said that their Confirmation gave them the grace to go forth and “build a civilization of truth and love.” I could not have said it better myself! Truth and love: the foundation of civilization. *Both* are necessary, *both*, together, if we wish to have a flourishing society: truth *and* love.

**Human Ecology**

“Truth in Love” – “Caritas in Veritate” – is, of course, the title of Pope Benedict XVI’s Encyclical on Catholic Social Teaching. In it, he elaborates upon a theme which his predecessor, St. John Paul II, articulated in his social Encyclical *Centesimus Annus* regarding the need “to *safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic ‘human ecology’*” (n. 38; emphasis original), where he says:

In order to protect nature, it is not enough to intervene with economic incentives or deterrents; not even an apposite education is sufficient. These are important steps, but *the decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society*. If there is a

lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society [n. 51; emphasis original].

Pope Francis, too, has continued to build upon this insight of human ecology that his predecessors have bequeathed us. He certainly emphasizes it in his own social Encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, where he speaks all throughout on the interconnectedness of all of creation. The environment itself certainly makes this clear to us: air and water do not know political boundaries – a polluted river in one country will be polluted in its neighboring country; bad air quality in one city will affect the communities surrounding it, especially when they are downwind from their big neighbor. But even more so, all of the different sectors of life are

interconnected among themselves. And so, in teaching on our responsibility to care for our common home, Francis can be so bold as to say the following:

Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment. It is not a healthy attitude which would seek 'to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it' [n. 155].

Indeed, this male-female complementarity is stamped in all of creation: "male and female He created them" (Gen 1:27). A year before *Laudato Si'*, in an address to the participants at the International Colloquium on the Complementarity between Man and Woman sponsored by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican, Pope Francis said the following:

Marriage and the family are in crisis today. We now live in a culture of the temporary, in which more and more people reject marriage as a public obligation. This revolution of customs and morals has often waved 'the flag of freedom', but it has, in reality, brought spiritual and material devastation to

countless human beings, especially the poorest and most vulnerable. It is ever more evident that the decline of the culture of marriage is associated with increased poverty and a host of other social ills that disproportionately affect women, children and the elderly. It is always they who suffer the most in this crisis.

The crisis of the family has produced a human ecological crisis, for social environments, like natural environments, need protection. Although humanity has come to understand the need to address the conditions that threaten our natural environment, we have been slow — we have been slow in our culture, even in our Catholic culture — we have been slow to recognize that even our social environments are at risk. It is therefore essential that we foster a new human ecology and make it move forward. [n. 2]

From Sacred Scripture, from the teachings of the recent Popes, indeed, from observing all of creation, it becomes clear that the complementarity between man and woman is at the heart of this “new human ecology.” This is also conventional wisdom learned from millennia of human experience: as goes marriage, so goes the family; and as goes the family, so goes the society. To properly order our society, we must begin – not end, nor stop at, but *begin* – by appreciating and esteeming the meaning of the complementarity of man and woman, and therefore fostering the institution of marriage in society so that children may know and be loved by their mother and their father. This is a foundational good, not just for the children, not just for the family, but for all of society. Marriage is the only institution that does this,

that connects husbands and wives to each other and to any children who come from their union.

### **Societal Schizophrenia**

Yes, Pope Francis is right: “Marriage and the family are in crisis today,” and this “has produced a human ecological crisis.” To put it colloquially, it has “messed everything up.” This has actually been going on for a very long time, but it certainly exploded with all of the social upheaval and revolutions of the 1960’s. The phenomenon we know as “the ’60s” was about a lot of things, some of which are values that we all accept and cherish to this day, such as – most notably – the decade in which the civil rights movement reached its zenith, culminating in the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. But it also generated a fragmentation of society that has continued to grow worse ever since and affects us acutely to this day. The (in)famous “summer of love” of 1967 was followed by a long winter of drug addiction, family disintegration, and despair. One very sad recollection of the aftermath of the “summer of love” was shared by a woman still living in the Haight Ashbury 20 years later: “They were expecting a city of love and found a city like any other city, and a lot of them ended up being prostitutes” (Robert Lindsey, “Twenty Years After the Summer of Love, the Haight Ashbury Looks Back” *NY Times*, July 2, 1987).

Those years were marked by many ironies, which perplex me to this day. For example: yes, 1964 was an historical breakthrough for the civil rights of African-Americans, but the following year the Assistant Secretary of Labor (and later multi-term senator from New York), sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, issued his famous report, “The Negro

Family: The Case for National Action” (known as the Moynihan Report), identifying and analyzing the deep roots of black poverty in the United States. His conclusion? The high rate of fatherless families – 25 percent at the time – would greatly hinder progress of blacks toward economic and political equality. And there is no substitute for that. In fact, Moynihan – who favored government programs to assist the poor – stated in the report: “The steady expansion of this welfare program, as of public assistance programs in general, can be taken as a steady disintegration of the Negro family structure over the past generation in the United States.”

So there’s the irony: you’d think the society would recognize this and do everything possible to reverse this trend in the African-American community and prevent it from growing in other sectors of society. Instead, what happened? Right at the moment that African-Americans finally gained equality in the law, social conditions changed such that behaviors which contribute to and exacerbate this problem became accepted and even expected, thus keeping too many black families trapped in poverty. What many saw as a racially charged issue in 1964 has since spread throughout American society across ethnic groups. In 2015, 29 percent of births to white non-Hispanic mothers were outside of marriage, as were 53 percent of births to Hispanic mothers and 70 percent of births to black mothers. If we add divorce rates to this mix, we can see that the fraying of our family ties has touched virtually every community in America.

And the ironies continued. Some of the more well-seasoned citizens here may remember, as I, the famous “Murphy Brown” line of then-Vice President Dan Quayle. This is where, in a speech in 1992 to the Commonwealth Club of – of all places – my own town

of San Francisco, he took a swipe at the popular TV character, saying that she was “mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another lifestyle choice.” This, of course, caused a huge storm of controversy, and he took a lot of heat for it. And yet, a year later, an article was published in the Atlantic Magazine (April 1993) authored by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead with the bold title, “Dan Quayle Was Right.” To give you a gist of the content of the article, the précis under the heading stated the following:

The social-science evidence is in: though it may benefit the adults involved, the dissolution of intact two-parent families is harmful to large numbers of children. Moreover, the author argues, family diversity in the form of increasing numbers of single-parent and stepparent families does not strengthen the social fabric but, rather, dramatically weakens and undermines society.

And even Candice Bergen herself, who played Murphy Brown, said in an article published by the Associated Press ten years later (July 11, 2002): “... his [Vice President Quayle’s] speech was a perfectly intelligent speech about fathers not being dispensable and nobody agreed with that more than I did.”

That article by Dafoe Whitehead though, was just one small drop in the very large bucket of social science data collected ever since the Moynihan Report confirming his

analysis linking so many grave social ills such as poverty, crime, incarceration, school drop-out rates and youth violence with family breakdown and, especially, fatherless families. As just one example, a few years ago the book, “Do Fathers Matter?”, was published, with the subtitle, “What Science Is Telling Us About the Parent We’ve Overlooked.” In it, author Paul Raeburn points out, “There is no example of a human society in which fathers do not help raise the children” (Raeburn, 19) and that, “For most of human history, fathers were responsible for protecting their children and for teaching them the things they needed to know to survive and prosper” (212). He explores many of the new experiments that have been completed on animals that appear to shed light on the unique contributions of fathers on children. A study from David Popenoe at Rutgers University, cited in the book, says that “the evidence is overwhelming” that a family of mother and father is better for the child than one parent (222). And in fact, Senator Moynihan himself, in an interview with PBS in 2001, said, with what sounds like a tone of almost fatalistic resignation, the following:

My view is we had stumbled onto a major social change in the circumstances of post-modern society. It was not long ago in this past century that an anthropologist working in London ... postulated what he called the first rule of anthropology: That in all known societies, all male children have an acknowledged male parent. That’s what we found out everywhere.... And well, maybe it’s not true anymore. Human societies change.

All of this is, I believe, emblematic of a societal schizophrenia that has marked our nation (and much of the rest of the world, too) regarding the basic idea of marriage and the family: we bemoan so many social ills, especially poverty, which we know from broad, deep and consistent scientific data – not to mention common sense – is caused in large part by fatherlessness, while at the same time celebrating and enshrining in the popular culture a distorted notion of freedom with corresponding behaviors that destroy the integrity of marriage and the family, the very thing necessary to cure and prevent those social ills in the first place. That is precisely the purpose of marriage. Or, as someone more studied than I on this subject put it: when a baby is born, the mother is sure to be somewhere nearby; there's no guarantee, though, that the father will be. Society needs a cultural mechanism that attaches fathers to their children and to the woman with whom they brought those children into the world. That cultural mechanism is marriage, and it's the only one there is; there simply isn't any other. It is not a "Catholic thing," then, to say that children need a father as well as a mother in order to have the optimal environment for their own flourishing. On the contrary, it is a universal principle that societies that don't manage the procreative implications of the sexual act don't last for very long.

### **What Does Love Mean?**

So, that's the bad news. But now compare all this to Pope Francis' opening words in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*: "The joy of love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church" (AL 1). What is most noteworthy here is where he does *not* begin: with the experiences and challenges of families today. That is dealt with in

the second chapter. The Holy Father begins by asking how God envisions the family. Only then does he examine contemporary experience and move on to a specifically Christian understanding of marriage and family life. This order of topics is extremely important, because it forthrightly affirms our conviction that there *is* a divine plan for marriage and family.

“The joy of love”: that is really what is at the root of all of the irony and confusion and social schizophrenia to which I referred a moment ago. It is simply the meaning of the word “love.” That word certainly evokes complex realities, and it is necessary to exercise careful discernment. We might say of that watchword of the ’60s, “free love,” what G.K. Chesterton said about “birth control”: it is neither. If by “free love” we mean intimacy without commitment, then it is certainly not love (except the poisonous self-love that uses another person for one’s own gratification) nor is it in fact free – rather, its price has been extremely high both for society and for countless individuals.

There is another sense, though, in which “free love” can be profoundly real and deeply Catholic. It is the freedom manifested in God Who created everything in order to share His divine goodness, and Who made us in His image and likeness to enter into a communion of life and love with Him. It is the freedom of unconditional divine love that sustains us in existence, the love of a heavenly Father who sends His rain on the just and on the unjust alike (Mt 5:45). It is the freedom manifested in Jesus Christ who showed the depth of his love by freely laying down his life on the Cross. “Free love” that is self-giving and sacrificial is divine, and it is that kind of love that is at the heart of God’s divine plan for marriage and the family. Love put into action is what we call “charity.” On this point Pope

Benedict said in his Encyclical “God is Love” – “*Deus Caritas Est*”: “Charity ... cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered proselytism. Love is free; it is not practiced as a way of achieving other ends” (DCE 31c). “Love is free.” So there you have it: even Pope Benedict is encouraging us to engage in free love! That is because, understood in this Catholic sense, “free love” is nothing other than God’s plan for our human flourishing.

### **Witness of Sanctity**

That is the truth of what love is. But how can we speak the truth in love to our world? This is simply another way of asking how we can evangelize. An insight by Pope St. Paul VI offers sound guidance. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, he writes:

... it is appropriate ... to emphasize the following point: for the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one’s neighbor with limitless zeal. As we said recently to a group of lay people, ‘Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.’ St. Peter expressed this well when he held up the example of a reverent and chaste life that wins over even

without a word those who refuse to obey the word (1 Pt 3:1). It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus – the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity [EV 41].

The witness of sanctity! That is our most persuasive argument. The first believers lived in a society whose moral values stood in stark contrast to the truly “free love” of Christian discipleship. They were often dismissed with a sneer smacking of an air of superiority, or worse, they were imprisoned or put to death because their way of life was an affront to those around them. But even those who despised them admired them. In the third century, Tertullian averred that even our enemies paid us this compliment. This great apologist described how Christian communities used their resources:

... not for banquets or drinking parties ... but for the support and burial of the poor, for children who are without parents and means of subsistence, for aged men who are confined to the house; likewise, for shipwrecked sailors, and for any in the mines, on islands or in prisons. Provided only it be for the sake of fellowship with God, they become entitled to loving and protective care for their confession. The practice of such a

special love brands us in the eyes of some. ‘See,’ they say, ‘how they love one another. ... See how ready they are to die for each other’ [Apology 39].

This is the legacy we have received from our ancestors in the faith. Those first generations of Christians in the city of Rome were so often scapegoated by the powerful pagan Roman government. But when a plague would strike the city and the well-to-do fled to the hills for safety until the plague subsided, it was the Christians who stayed behind to care for the sick, and at great risk to their own health and very lives. And not just the Christian sick: all the sick, regardless of religion, of how they lived their lives, or even what they thought of the Christians themselves. The historian Eusebius noted about the Christians of his time, “All day long some of them tended to the dying and to their burial, countless numbers with no one to care for them. Others gathered together from all parts of the city a multitude of those withered from famine and distributed bread to them all.” Likewise, the Emperor Julian complained to one of his pagan priests, “[They] support not only their poor, but ours as well.”

What the saints offer us is not a brief “summer of love” but a perpetual “springtime of love” that is constantly refreshed by divine love. This is where the lasting joy of love is to be found. It is this kind of love and compassion in the service of truth, especially the truth of the human person, that has marked the lives of the holy ones who are our predecessors in the faith: hospitals, orphanages, schools, outreach to the poor and destitute – giving without concern for getting anything in return, seeing in each human being,

especially in the poor and destitute, a priceless child beloved by God, “one of these least ones,” whom God calls to turn away from sin and toward Him, so that they might be saved.

### **Signs of Hope**

This is the legacy but, yes, it does seem that our society is getting further and further away from this truth. And not only truth, love as well: senseless violence, harsh rhetoric, bitter polarization; now people respond to those who disagree with them not with counter-arguments and seeking to understand, but by targeting their opponents, isolating them, and then attacking them – verbally, morally (loss of jobs, stymied in their career, object of slander, etc.) and, sometimes, even physically. We see the continual demise of marriage, family, and, now, even the very idea of the human family consisting of male-female complementarity. We are aghast at the recent legislation passed in the state of New York which is nothing short of legal infanticide, and horrified at the glee and jubilation with which it is celebrated. Yes, the situation is dire. But that’s not the whole story. There is also good news to report!

Now, don’t get me wrong – I’m not being Pollyannaish about this. True, it has never been this bad in recent history, and our country is at a critical juncture. But there are silver linings in these dark clouds. First of all, the reaction to the New York legislation: even people sympathetic to keeping abortion legal are disturbed at the elation displayed over the legal killing of new-born and near new-born human life. The aggressive pro-abortion forces detect a possible challenge to their sacred cow, the Roe vs. Wade decision, and are reacting with unmitigated hysteria. Just look at their reactions to the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh

to the Supreme Court. Yes, they are finally showing their true face: a face that is vile, wretched and evil. And those with eyes to see and a brain to think can trace it back to its origin: the evil and devastation wrought by the so-called sexual revolution. So their true colors are finally beginning to be seen.

Even before this, though, a change in the conversation about pro-life at the beginning of life was already taking place. Those of you who are long-time veterans of the pro-life movement know what I'm talking about. In the early years of our movement, you were told that abortion was inevitable, that while, yes, there are some people who still don't like it, in a few years it will be calmly accepted by all Americans as just a part of life. You were told that you were interfering with a woman's right to privacy, that Church and state should stay out of the way. But you knew that that was just a deception technique, to deflect attention away from the rights of that baby growing in her womb. And you were smart enough not to be fooled. Most of all, you were told that you were anti-woman, that you were standing in the way of women's progress and full equality in society.

Nearly fifty years and sixty-million abortions later, the very painful truth has come to light: yes, abortion does hurt women. Those of you well-seasoned in the pro-life movement have understood that the movement is about more than saving the life of the baby; it is also about the mother, and providing her the emotional, spiritual and material support she needs to make a happy and truly human choice – indeed, so that she can truly have a choice at all. You will recall that, in the early years of our movement, these things could not be spoken in polite company. To be known as pro-life, or even to defend the pro-life position when the topic would come up in conversation, would often mean banishment from the ranks of those

deemed socially acceptable. But that has now changed. Yes, it is still harder in our society today to be pro-life than an abortion rights advocate; but it's not so politically-incorrect to be known as a pro-lifer anymore. Now one can be known as holding that position and still be respected in "polite company." This is progress! Even more so, we have the numbers to prove it: hundreds of thousands every year at the March for Life in Washington, D.C., and upwards of 50,000 at the Walk for Life West Coast in my own city of San Francisco. The Mass at our Cathedral before the Walk is the most-attended Mass of the year in our Archdiocese. I would imagine many of you participate in it, so you have seen it for yourselves. And you have seen, too, that the pro-life movement is young. It is largely young people at the Mass and at the Walk, as well as the March in D.C. "I am the pro-life generation": the young generation is the most pro-life generation since the disastrous Roe decision.

Another data point to ponder: last year marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Paul VI's landmark Encyclical on the responsible regulation of birth, *Humanae Vitae*. Again, those of you more advanced in life remember the fallout: almost universal dissent, even among bishops; vicious attacks against Pope Paul; those few who agreed with the teaching were running for cover. Compare that to last year: dozens of special conferences and symposia were held in our country alone to mark the anniversary; I attended and spoke at some of them myself. One of the first was held at the Catholic University of America, which had been the epicenter of the dissent, led by one of its professors of moral theology, Fr. Charles Curran. The irony was not lost on the University's President, John Garvey, who spoke about it quite explicitly in his opening comments and expressed how proud and happy he

was that the University was taking the lead in reasserting the truth of the Church's teaching. All of this would have been unimaginable even twenty years ago.

And on the Church's teaching on responsible parenthood, too, it is young people who are embracing this truth. Everywhere I go people express to me their concern about the Church losing our young people. And it is true, the culture is eating them up. But not all of them. The Church is blessed with a corps of vibrant, faithful young Catholics who are truly alive with the faith. They are affectionately referred to as the "John Paul II generation." They want the full truth of the Catholic faith, not the watered down version. They yearn for Catholic worship that is reverent, beautiful and God-centered, bringing out the best in our liturgical, artistic and cultural patrimony. They understand the incredible, awesome legacy we have inherited as Catholics – our "Catholic birthright," as I have heard some of them put it – and they want to build on it and pass it on to the next generation.

This generation of young Catholics gives us assurance that the faith *will* be passed on to future generations; that the light of the civilization of truth and love will continue to shine in the increasing darkness that seems to be enveloping the world in our time. This civilization is the legacy we have received from our ancestors in the faith, from those whose lives bore witness to love and compassion in the service of the truth, and that we are now called to continue. Now is our turn, and in our time this means especially defending and promoting the foundational good of marriage. Marriage, after all, is supposed to help a society learn the real lesson of "free love," learning the lesson to be selfless, living for the other, not oneself. As St. John Paul II said so famously in his own Encyclical on marriage and the family, *Familiaris Consortio* (something to which I already alluded earlier): "The future of the world

and of the church passes through the family” (FC 75). That is to say, the way of civilization passes through marriage. But so does our work of evangelization. Better yet, the work of evangelization is precisely the work of building a truly human civilization, that is, one based on the truth of the human person and God’s plan for our flourishing both as individuals and as a society, and, indeed for our eternal salvation. Marriage is absolutely indispensable to this project in every way.

It was through monogamous, life-long, faithful marriage that the Church was able to Christianize a pagan world, and call it to a higher and more noble – that is to say, truly human – civilization. The spiritual and social rubble left in the wake of the upheavals of the 1960’s is a call to us to attend to the work of rebuilding. But let us be careful, and take note of Psalm 127: “Unless the LORD build the house, they labor in vain who build. Unless the LORD guard the city, in vain does the guard keep watch.” The work of civilization building – or “kingdom building,” to put it in more common parlance – is the Lord’s doing, not ours. If it were ours, then we could change it, it would give *us* the control over the project. Thus, we would be not unlike the ancient Israelites who made the molten calf, and worshipped the work of their own hands. Just as they felt the tug back to the paganism out of which the Lord called them, so do we feel the tug of the neo-paganism of our own time. So we need to make sure we have that right from the start: God does the building; we are just his day laborers.

## **Conclusion**

Love is the answer. “Free love,” actually, properly understood. But love in the truth. And the truth doesn’t change. Laws might change, but truth doesn’t. If the law does not correspond to our nature, such that there is a conflict between the law and nature, guess which will prevail? And so it is no surprise that we have a lot to fix in our society. A society of justice, peace and prosperity for all: these are the fruits of a society with a strong culture of marriage and the family, one that respects the sanctity of human life in all of its stages and conditions of life. It all fits together in God’s neatly designed plan; it is a “package deal.” This noble cause is a call to love that we cannot abandon, that we will not give up on, and that in the end we know will triumph. We are all alarmed at how extreme the situation has become, but, as I pointed out, we do have much to be grateful for and to work with. There are signs of progress, light in the midst of darkness.

So let us steel ourselves, with the help of God’s grace, to bear witness to the truth in love, for the truth spoken in love has a power over the human heart. The truth *lived* in love has even a greater power over the human heart, the power of attraction. Let us, then, pick up the torch, and pass on to a new generation the beauty of God’s truth, especially by living that reality in a way that makes a difference in our lives and in the lives of those around us, friend and foe alike. Let us take heart from the legacy we have received, let us place our trust in God, and let us go forth to be God’s workers in building a civilization of truth and love.