

Standing firm together in time of trial

Assembly of Confessing Congregations

I am very honoured to be asked to speak at this Conference. The theme of the conference is a most appropriate one at this moment in the life of the Christian Church in Australia – we need to stand firm together in Christ.

Growing Anti-Christian Sentiment

The Christian church is entering a new era in its history in Australia. It is entering an era where it is no longer seen as a respected presence in the society, but is viewed by many as an obstacle to the wellbeing of society. The Christian church is currently being forced more and more to retire within its own walls. There is a growing anti-Christian sentiment where the Christian churches are regarded as being out of touch with the realities of contemporary life, wedded to some bygone era.

The dominant view now is that humanity can and ought to finally throw off the remaining vestiges of the Christian religion and be liberated from its oppressive morality. With this humanity can finally realise its true destiny and greatness: the final emancipation from servitude to Christian morality.

Attempts are already well underway in the West to marginalise and limit the participation of Christians in the public square through the enactment of legislation that requires Christians to violate their consciences. In the US we have seen the calculated move by the Obama Administration to force particularly Catholic institutions to offer healthcare packages that pay for contraception and abortifacients. So too, here in Australia, State and Commonwealth governments are beginning to introduce laws which are directly aimed at restricting the freedom of Christian organisations.

The 2013 (mis-named) Reproductive Health Act, not only legalised abortion in Tasmania but introduced a 150m exclusion zone around abortion clinics to prevent any form of what is referred to as “prohibited behaviour”, essentially what amounts to any form of counselling or protest. It is interesting to note that historically pro-life groups in

Tasmania have not undertaken such actions outside abortion clinics. In other words, there was no need for such exclusion zones.

In doing so the Act attacked two of the most fundamental human rights, the right to freedom of assembly and the right to freedom of speech. The exclusion zone provision established a restriction on any form of public expression which in some way expresses disapproval of abortion outside an abortion clinic.

In addition this Act requires doctors who have a conscientious objection to abortion to provide women seeking abortions “with a list of prescribed health services from which the woman may seek advice, information or counselling on the full range of pregnancy services”. In other words, they have to refer her to services which offer abortion, violating their consciences.

Governments hostile to Christianity are more emboldened than ever to pass legislation which they know is incompatible with Christian beliefs and practices. One would expect this to escalate in the years ahead. We are confronted with a new era of legal persecution of Christians by the State. Along with this more recent direct attack on Christians we have witnessed the slower and longer term effort to overthrow the Christian moral framework which has informed Western societies over the last millennium.

A period of intense social change

Why has this occurred?

In the Western world we are witnessing the ascendancy of secular liberalism as the new cultural ideology. This secular liberalism has its origins in the Enlightenment. It has become a key influence in shaping Western society. In more recent times its principal vehicle has been the social movement referred to as the Sexual Revolution.

Secular liberalism is an atheistic humanism which is based on a false anthropology. It views the human person as most fully human when separated from God. On this understanding the human person is held to be the final authority not only of morality but of existence itself.

The US Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy embodied this understanding when he claimed in the 1992 ruling of *Planned Parenthood versus Casey* that “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life...”.

The Church sees things very differently. The Catholic Church teaches that (quote) “The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light”. (See *Gaudium et spes* #22) In other words, humanity is only fully revealed to itself in the person of Jesus Christ. The human cannot be fully grasped only in terms of the human; it requires the Divine to reveal its true nature. To understand the human we must look beyond the human to what is permanent and lasting, the Truth, which is Jesus Christ. It is only in this truth that man is revealed to himself.

Over the last fifty years in particular we have witnessed the rise of atheistic humanism in attempts, mostly successful, to redefine the dominant societal understanding of human sexuality, marriage and family. In a relatively short period of time we have witnessed an extraordinary shift in attitudes around human sexuality, which has resulted in legislative reform to enshrine the new social mores.

Arguably, the critical moment came when there was a widespread acceptance of contraception, which, sadly, many Christians embraced. This fundamentally separated the procreative and unitive dimensions of human sexual relations. By providing the ability for couples to intentionally remove the generative dimension from the sexual expression of their love they allowed for the widespread acceptability of sex as an end in itself. Cohabiting couples, or in particular single women, could now engage in sexual intimacy without the worry of unwed pregnancy and the social stigma it attracted. The wholesale availability of contraceptives, especially the Pill, led to a profound change in societal attitudes towards sex.

Pope Paul VI in his 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, saw that once there was a means to separate the act of sexual intercourse from its life-giving dimension there would be a radical increase in promiscuity which he prophetically saw would result in the devaluing or sexual objectification of women.

Western society has witnessed a dramatic change in its attitudes towards sexuality. We have seen the moral acceptability of same-sex sexual relationships. Once laws prohibiting same-sex sexual expression were repealed, the "homosexual" lobby went on the offensive pushing for the legal equality of same-sex relationships with marriage and more recently legal redefinition of marriage to include same-sex relationships.

In all this there was one voice that consistently challenged these changes in society's attitudes, it was the Christian church. Those who advocate sexual liberation in all its forms knew that there is one key focus of resistance. They knew that they had to nullify the influence of the Churches in the legislature and in public debate.

It was interesting to note that when Katy Faust was on Q&A, Tony Jones kept persisting with the question: "are you a Christian?" The implication was obvious, that if she was a Christian then her personal experience could be discounted. These days it is a liability to be a recognised Christian in public debate. A Christian is considered to be biased, bigoted and judgemental. Any Christian who expressed their views on matters of sexuality, marriage and family is considered to be guilty of "hate speech".

Of course, one reason why Christians have always fallen foul of totalitarian regimes is that their ultimate allegiance is to a higher power, the Truth itself who is God. This was a problem for the Romans who required citizens to worship the emperor. It was a problem in the USSR because believers would not give their ultimate allegiance to atheistic materialism. History has shown that Christians are the subject of persecution because, despite their willingness to be good citizens, they will always see themselves as pilgrims on this earth and know that their homeland is in heaven.

In an address to the Cardinal electors following the death of Pope John Paul II, the then Cardinal Ratzinger, used a term which aptly captures what is occurring in Western societies. He spoke of the "Dictatorship of Relativism".¹ This phrase expresses something very important about the rise of relativism. Contrary to its own sloganeering that it is all about tolerance and diversity, relativism necessarily imposes its own controversial anthropology and morality, and will do so ruthlessly if given the chance.

¹ First used in his homily as Cardinal Ratzinger for the Mass for the opening of the Conclave to elect the successor to John Paul II, Monday 18 April 2005.

It claims the right to be the only way of seeing reality. Any other view cannot be tolerated. It argues that the public square should be only open to thought and argument stripped of any reliance on religious belief or presupposition. It sees religion as a private matter which should not influence public debate. However, it is itself a "religion", if by religion we mean a worldview with an accompanying set of moral beliefs. Secular liberalism is a way of understanding human existence and it affirms certain moral positions. It is not a neutral position and a value free zone.

The charge is often levelled at Christians that they are seeking to impose their morality on society. However, secular liberals are the ones imposing their views of human existence and their morality on others. Pope John Paul II answered this charge very well when he said that the Church seeks not to impose but rather to propose its views to society.

Secular liberalism seeks to eliminate any consideration of the Divine from human society. It proposes a freedom in matters sexual which is in fact simply licence to do whatever one wants. Pope John Paul II accurately spoke of the eclipse of God resulting in the eclipse of man. When God is removed from human life, humanity loses sight of itself, it cannot make sense of itself. Humanity enters a darkness. The light is taken away. What is lauded as a new freedom becomes a path to unhappiness and the breakdown of the quality of human life.

Pope

Benedict XVI speaks of this as a "kind of amnesia which... is nonetheless a denial of the treasure of our faith, a denial that could lead to the loss of our deepest identity".² Cultural forgetfulness is one of the great problems of our time. We forget that our society only exists as it does because of its Christian inheritance.

Without this we cannot but return to the pagan dictum of power as the ultimate authority in human matters. If there is no objective truth, no Divine which transcends the human, then the final authority in human existence can only be the Nietzschean will to power, where the only absolute is the rule of the stronger will.

We are faced with a stark choice, the way of Christianity (which aspires to goodness, truth and beauty) or the way of nihilistic atheism where there

² Message for World Youth Day 2011.

is only the rule of the stronger. As Pope Benedict noted: "A freedom which is *hostile* or *indifferent* to God becomes self-negating and does not guarantee full respect for others".³

Freedom of Religion

Christianity is, in fact, the true champion of human freedom. The idea of religious freedom itself is a fruit of the Christian view of life. Human freedom is of fundamental importance to the Christian. For at the very heart of God's nature is love which is only possible with freedom. Authentic love cannot be forced, it can only be the free intentional action of the individual.

Related to this is Christianity's elevation of human nature to be a reflection of the divine. For human beings are only able to love God because they have first been made in the image and likeness of the Divine. Fundamental to Christianity is the view that every human being has an essential dignity flowing from this creation in the *Imago Dei*.

A religious view of reality should be given respect in the public square. Public debate is best served by a vigorous honest interchange between rival positions, in the search for wisdom and truth. It is important that public debate is conducted in a robust but fair exchange. This brings us to the related point of referring to Christians as bigots simply for expressing their belief on a matter that concerns human sexuality or marriage. The use of inflammatory rhetoric, which in fact bears no relationship to the facts, can only signal a degrading of social debate. Reason is replaced by emotion.

Currently the public debate on the question of the definition of marriage is more subject to vehement emotional reactions, rather than rational argument. This needs to change as we approach the plebiscite.

Christianity has offered and will continue to offer real social benefits in society. In the past Christianity was recognised and valued because it contributed to the social wellbeing. It fostered higher moral standards through the promotion of a commitment to the life of virtue and self-sacrifice.

³ Message for the World Day of Peace 2011.

In the early settlement of Australia, for instance, there was a strong view that chaplains should be appointed to work with convicts as it was recognised that such men could assist in the reformation of convicts. That is why the English government was willing to pay even Catholic priests to act as chaplains in Van Diemen's Land. Religion was seen as beneficial to the social order. Without the call of religious belief to more noble virtues, society is forced to rely upon law and regulation to achieve the just ordering of society. Christianity has made a great contribution to the social stability of Western societies.

Challenge to religious freedom

There is no doubt that Australian society is moving in a particular direction. The forces at work have been growing in strength and we will not be able to turn the tide in the short term. However, truth will have a way of coming to the fore, and freedom will not be trampled down for long. We should hold on to a belief that eventually things will change. Patterns of behaviour that are currently being promoted will be proven to be damaging. The bad fruits will become evident.

We are entering a new phase of Christian life. We will have to learn to live under various forms of persecution, but we will live as a people of hope. We will live as a people who know that God has been victorious in Jesus Christ. We will be purified and hopefully strengthened through this process. We will be readied to once again go forth with a message of truth, goodness and beauty which will triumph over the darkness that has descended on our beloved nation.

Archbishop Julian Porteous

Friday, 4 November 2016