

The Courage to See: A Pastoral Reflection for Great Lent, 2015

By Bishop John Michael Botean

My beloved brothers and sisters of the Diocese of St. George in Canton,

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, who has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father, to him be glory and power forever [and ever]. Amen. (Revelation 1:4-6 NABre)

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In my last letter to you, my reflection for last Christmas, I spoke to you of dreams—God’s dreams, Mary’s dreams, your dreams, my dreams—and I specifically called to mind the need for us all to become simple in mind and heart, so that we may be “lenses” through whom the world may know and encounter the one true God through Him who has made God known as Father, our Lord Jesus Christ. I told you that my dream for 2015 was that we may

find freedom from all the things that hold our hearts and minds bound, and especially from the tyranny of things that we ourselves have manufactured, in our fearful imaginings, about life, about ourselves, and about one another. My dream for our diocese in 2015 is that together, by God’s grace, each one of our parishes will find the courage to dream anew. (Pastoral Letter: “Simplicity, Freedom, and the Courage to Dream: A Reflection for Christmas,” Christmas, 2014)

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At the outset of this season of Great Lent, I thought it would be appropriate to begin to share some of my thoughts about what such freedom could mean for us as a local Church (for it is the diocese that is the local church in Catholic teaching and discipline), and what shape our parish families, as well as our lives as individual Christians, could take if we find the courage to dream anew.

As human beings, let alone as Christians and as members of our parishes, it is sometimes hard to agree on a direction to take as we move through life. It can be particularly difficult for our parishes to find themselves and the mission God has given them in the huge, confusing marketplace of ideas and beliefs that make up our North American culture. Some of us are members of our parishes because our families have “always been Greek-Catholic.” Some are members by choice and conviction. Some believe that the purpose of a parish community is to perpetuate itself, or simply to “be there,” to have a priest to perform the rituals we need when we reach certain moments of our lives. There are as many visions about what our parishes ought to be, and why they should exist, as there are people in the pews and priests in the altar. The vision I want to share, and to make rather explicit by means of this and subsequent letters, is only my vision, but it is the

vision of a person who has been called by the Church to communicate his vision clearly to the Christians in his care, namely the bishop.

There is one thing I should be very clear about. While I dearly want all of our parish and mission communities to survive and to thrive, the survival of any Church institution is of secondary importance compared to its fidelity to the Gospel, to the message and the mission of Jesus Christ. I firmly believe that the survival, or the demise, of any of our parishes is not our business. It is God's business. Our business is to be faithful to the Gospel, to leading a Christian life, but I also believe that God will bless our fidelity with success in our mission, too. If we make it our purpose to magnify the Lord, to manifest Jesus Christ living in our midst to a world that is in great need of Him, a world that is desperate to know that there is a God and that this God loves each person whom He has called out of nothingness into existence, I firmly believe God will bless and support our parishes in that. The survival of our communities would then be the least of our concerns.

By the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are again invited to participate in Great Lent for our salvation and the salvation of all human beings. Great Lent is a time within the time of our life to choose to spend in an intensified effort to grow in our love of and fidelity to God through Christ Jesus Our Lord. It is a time given to us by the tradition of the Church to ponder the mystery of our own existence within the mystery of Jesus Christ, to examine our consciences and our consciousness, to judge, soberly and with a clear eye, the extent to which we are or are not living a wholehearted life of fidelity to Him. The witness of the martyrs of our own day, especially those in the Middle East, call us to a seriousness in our approach to the Faith that perhaps we have never considered before. What would a serious faith, a faith that prepares us for martyrdom, look like? What would be its characteristics, its main points? In what follows, I will try to articulate what I believe that faith would look like for each one of us as a Christian, and for our Church as a Christian community. In this context, it is necessary to speak specifically about the courage to see truth and its relationship to Christian morality.

The first word Jesus speaks in His public ministry (Mt 4:17) is "Repent" (Greek, *metanoia*, "change of mind, change of heart"). Change our mind in what direction? Obviously, in the direction of putting on the mind of Christ and discarding any piece of our mind that is not the mind of Christ, because we become what we think. The only Way to become Christ-like, to imitate Christ, to imitate God is to put on the mind of Jesus Christ, the Word of God Incarnate. We do this because all that is eternally holy, eternally good, eternally true, and eternally love has its alpha and omega and everything in between in the mind of Christ-God.

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Every day in the *aiteisis* (i.e., one of the litanies in our liturgy) the priest or deacon chants a petitionary prayer on behalf of the Christian community, "That we may spend the rest of our lives in peace and in penance...let us ask from the Lord." (Other Byzantine liturgical texts more accurately translate the word "penance" as "repentance.") The segment of the community present then chants on behalf of the entire community, "Grant us, O Lord." Over the decades more than a few people have said, "Isn't that prayer a bit of an exaggeration? To pray that people repent if they do something wrong is fine. But to pray

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that the rest of one's life be spent in repentance is a little over the top, isn't it?" To such a question I can only reply, "Unless person is a perfect Christian, unless one has totally put on the mind of Christ, unless one is loving as Jesus loves in thought, word and deed moment to moment this day and every day, unless one is not a sinner, then repentance must be part of his or her daily life, as well as the daily life of the institutional Church on earth."

This question, however, can also expose a blind spot in a person's Christian conscience and therefore in his or her moral life. I would define this moral blind spot as obliviousness to an evil that has become culturally normalized and in which he or she is participating as if they were engaged in doing good. Evil is here defined as that which is contrary to the will of God as definitively revealed by the words and deeds of Jesus, the Christ, the Word of God incarnate.

Let me explain. Conscience is intimately tied to consciousness. While there is a universal innate moral imperative ineradicably woven into the very being of the human being to "Do good and avoid evil," a great deal of what a person understands to be good or to be evil depends on what a person is conscious of and the truthfulness of what he or she is aware of. Since so much of the content of our consciousness is not something that we possess naturally from birth, but is, rather, acquired during life from sources outside of ourselves, it is morally imperative that we carefully validate the truth of what we have been given as truth in order to have a conscience that tells us to choose what is in fact good and tells us to avoid what is in fact evil. Pope St. John Paul II emphatically underlines this moral obligation using almost the exact the same words in two encyclicals, *The Splendor of Truth* (*Veritatis Splendor*) and *Faith and Reason* (*Fides et Ratio*):

*There exists a prior moral obligation, and a grave one at that, to seek the truth and to adhere to it once it is known. All human beings desire to know, and truth is the proper object of this desire. People cannot be genuinely indifferent to the question of whether what they know is true or not. One may define the human being, therefore, as the one who seeks the truth. The thirst for truth is so rooted in the human heart that to be obliged to ignore it would cast our existence into jeopardy (see *Fides et Ratio* #25 and #28, and *Veritatis Splendor* #34).*

If our first step in doing good and avoiding evil is not to honestly seek the truth about what is good and what is evil and reject all falsehoods about what is good and what is evil, then our entire Christian moral life is cast into jeopardy. As the desire to do good and avoid evil is woven into our very being, so also is the desire to know truth and reject falsehood about the content of good and evil. Consciousness and conscience are indelibly united, as are truth and goodness.

In a society where almost every billboard and television show justifies, indeed glorifies, evil, losing one conscience, one's sense of good and evil, one's awareness of what is the will of the Father, "who alone is good" (Mk 10:18; Lk 18:19), and what is the will of Satan, "the Father of lies and a murderer from the beginning" (Jn 8:44) is almost inevitable. Without a disciplined Christ-like personal spiritual life and without the support of an intense Christ-like Church community life, dedicated to discerning and living, in its time and its place, the

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will of the Father as revealed by Jesus, the Word of God “made flesh” (Jn 1: 14), the practical possibility that any Christian will retain his or her conscience is nearly zero.

We very much deceive ourselves if we take it for granted that the normal is good. The normal, like everything else that a Christian chooses, cannot be accepted as moral on its own say-so. The normal must, like everything else a Christian chooses, be evaluated in terms of its conformity with the person and teaching of the Jesus of the Gospel. What does not conform to the will of God as revealed by Jesus, regardless of how deeply it is embedded in a culture or in us as good, is not morally permissible for the Christian to choose.

The normalizing of evil does not happen by accident. It is a societal process whereby repulsive, degrading, brutal and murderous acts are continually engaged in until they become routine, individually or collectively, and then accepted, as “that is just the way things are done.”

The normalization of evil comes easily when money, status, power, and jobs are at stake. Companies can always find boards of directors and workers to produce pornography, poison gases, cheap abortions, napalm, instruments of torture and human destruction. Intellectuals, media pundits, celebrities and politicians will always be available for a price to spew out scientific or theological charlatanism to justify and thus normalize the evil being produced and used by those who put bread on their table. When and if employees of these companies, whether assembly line workers or Ph.D. scientists, begin to have moral misgivings about being part of a long chain of human acts that are intended to do evil and ultimately do result in evil, such employees are told, “*Don’t knock the job that feeds your family. There are plenty of people out there to replace you.*” And so, the moral qualms one was experiencing because he or she was participating in a process that is designed to result in and perpetuate evil, as defined by his or her Lord, God and Savior, Jesus Christ, are set aside.

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Hannah Arendt, the German-born Jewish-American political theorist, spent an extensive part of her life studying the problem of totalitarianism. How does it come into existence in a society? How does it work? How can it engage in unspeakable evil with the near full support of a culture? How can it be avoided or overcome? Her understanding of this issue is reflected in her well-known phrase, “*the banality of evil.*” Arendt’s thesis is that people who plan unspeakable crimes, like Adolph Eichmann, a top administrator in the machinery of the Nazi death camps, and people who carry out these evil plans, may not be crazy fanatics, but rather ordinary individuals who blindly accept the premises and the reigning myths of their state, society and/or culture and participate in any of its enterprises with the energy of good bureaucrats and the vigor of hard working employees.

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Because of their moral upbringing, the consciences of such people are salved by giving a 110% meticulous effort to the work they are doing and by the fact that they are feeding their families. They either refuse to look at or feel no need to look at the end consequences of that in which they are participating. Arendt, while recognizing the mystery of iniquity in the human condition—her doctoral dissertation was on St. Augustine—raised the issue of

whether the great evils of this world are functions of thoughtlessness, a tendency of ordinary people to obey orders and conform to mass opinion without a critical evaluation of the final results of their actions and inaction. I would add that the great evils of this world have been partially the fruit of a lack of serious discernment by Christians as to whether what they are participating in is faithful to their Baptismal commitment to put on Christ and to follow the will of Father as Jesus reveals it, which will is contained entirely (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1970, #2822) in His "new commandment," "*Love one another. As I have loved you, you should love one another*" (Jn 13:34, 15:12; see also Eph 5:1-2).

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Normalization of evil usually demands a retreat to ignorance, whether real, cultivated, imposed or feigned. Real ignorance is always a possibility with a human being. As Will Rogers once wrote, "*We are all ignorant, except on different subjects.*" It is possible to be truly unaware that one is participating in an unspeakable evil. However, there is also calculated ignorance, the refusal to see what there is to see but which one does not want to see, because seeing the truth that is right before his or her eyes would be inopportune or unbearable. Finally, there is feigned ignorance, the clear-sighted awareness of an evil reality in which one is participating, while simultaneously play-acting, "*I see nothing.*"

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In the case of non-culpable, real ignorance (of being involved in evil), there is no deliberate personal sin. But, there is personal sin in the other two forms of ignorance of being involved with evil, because in both cases a human being is engaged in an act of the will, a personal choice on behalf of evil. In the case of real ignorance one cannot choose what one does not know through no fault of one's own, and therefore there is no exercise of the will on behalf of evil, regardless of how atrocious the evil may be.

In Catholic moral theology, however, there is a dictum that is applicable to every moral choice. This is how it is stated in Bernard Haring's, C.Ss.R, *Law of Christ*, which for over two decades in the mid-Twentieth Century was the premier text used to teach moral theology in Catholic seminaries: "*The effort one is obliged to make in order to acquire the required moral certainty, so as not to sin in making a choice, is to be measured by the importance of the action itself and the consequences which are reasonably anticipated.*" The text goes on to state that the two areas that require the highest level of moral certainty before one can act morally are the administration of the Sacraments of Baptism and of Holy Orders, and intentionally causing the death of another or intentionally causing another grave suffering.

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When the anti-abortion documentary *The Silent Scream* (a film that shows the abortion process via ultrasound, and shows an abortion taking place in the uterus) was first released, there came forth from the pro-abortion movement an avalanche of charges of fraud because it said the documentary was no more than emotion-inducing anti-abortion propaganda. A significant effort was made to persuade people not to see it because what it communicated was unscientific.

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But do human beings know truth only by way of the scientific method? Is abortion only a science problem? Cannot human beings know truth by way of their emotions? If somehow a person could be sent back in time to Auschwitz in 1943, would not his or her

emotional response to the anguish and agonies, the deprivation and degradation being daily rained down upon fellow human beings emotionally communicate significant truth to him or her that no science book or political science book could ever communicate? The same holds true for viewing the abortion of a human being *in utero*.

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When the pro-abortion movement explicitly and cleverly began to try to keep people from viewing *The Silent Scream*, it was intentionally trying to keep people in a state of ignorance about a phenomenon about which people could be receiving significant new information and truth. The pro-choice folks did not want in the explicit consciousness of ordinary people the awareness about abortion that *The Silent Scream* could make available to them. It did not want people exposed to concrete, factual and empirical sense-images of what an abortion is and what it does to a human being *in utero*, because it knew what the intimate relation is between consciousness and conscience. A consciousness of something new regarding abortion could easily lead to a change of mind and heart morally. It could easily lead to repentance for having had an abortion or for having supported abortion rights groups.

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But, what should be our evaluation of a group that intentionally tries to keep human beings ignorant of information and truths that are salient to peoples' ability to make the best moral judgment possible in a situation—information and truths that the group knows might very well change the minds of people about the moral rectitude of what it is doing and promoting?

So also, my beloved Romanian Catholic family, is the case in many other critical areas of Christian life and morality. In our society, the calculated suppressing and distorting of information and truth, including truths that only emotional awareness can access, is normal. Its consequence is the dumbing-down of one's moral capacity to discern good from evil. Orchestrated ignorance is a way to Novocain the moral faculty of the human being, including the Christian, in order to normalize engaging in unthinkable evil in a society.

The relatively newfound popularity and moral acceptability of abortion is but one example in our society of nurtured ignorance by means of systematic and organized deception, resulting in the normalization of evil. There are many, many other examples, including the destruction of 400,000 Iraqi children by a United States and United Nations embargo in the 1990's, with hardly a peep from American Christians. The American society's all but silent indifference and acquiescence to the ten year orgy of bloodletting that resulted in the destruction and maiming of two million Iraqi civilians—children, women and men—by the United States and its Coalition of the Willing, after invading Iraq on the basis of a contrived lie that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, is another example of how ignorance serves to normalize evil.

I am writing this not out of any concern for partisan governmental politics. Normalized evil can be found operating in all 196 nation-states on this planet. I am writing this because Great Lent is before us. During these forty days we, myself included, will be examining our conscience, and therefore our consciousness, to truthfully discern what is there in our life

that is consistent with the mind of Christ and what is not, what must be committed to ever more intensely and what must be discarded.

Now, obviously not everything that is normal is evil. Not everything that is normal is inconsistent with the mind of Christ, the Way of Jesus and the will of the Father. But normalization is one way Satan uses to make us agents of his will rather than agents of the will of the Father, as made visible in and by Christ Jesus, Our Lord. Paul McCartney of Beatles fame wrote, *"If slaughterhouses had glass walls, we'd all be vegetarian."* He is here metaphorically communicating a piece of what I have been attempting to point out in this Lenten Pastoral. We participate in normalized evil without any Christian moral compunction by pulling the shades down or having the shades pulled down in our minds and thereby not seeing what is there to see.

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Between 1990 and 2012, the U.S. and Great Britain killed 3.3 million Iraqis through sanctions and war. If we had observed this human slaughter over that twenty-two year period as we have observed the slaughter of a human life *in utero* in *The Silent Scream*, would we, as faithful Romanian Catholic men and women have responded to it with the indifference with which we have responded to it? I doubt it. Our hearts would have broken over the inflicted human misery that was going on, and on, and on. But someone, or perhaps we ourselves, pulled the shades down in our consciousness and conscience, and thus acceptance of, and maybe even expressed support for, this form of normalized evil became and continues to be part of our life and the history we leave to the world, a history we will bring before *"the awesome judgment seat of Christ."*

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Archbishop Charles Chaput, O.F.M.Cap., of Philadelphia (full disclosure: he happens to have been my first theology professor as well as spiritual director during my first year in the seminary) has well summed up the spiritual pathology that I am asking you, my fellow Romanian Catholics of the United States and Canada, to give some very prayerful and thoughtful attention to this Great Lent. He lays bare this spiritual malaise in these words:

We live in a culture where our marketers and entertainment media compulsively mislead us about the sustainability of youth; the indignity of old age; the avoidance of suffering; the denial of death; the nature of real beauty; the impermanence of every human love; the oppressiveness of children and family; the silliness of virtue; and the cynicism of religious faith. It's a culture of fantasy, selfishness, sexual confusion and illness that we've brought upon ourselves.

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Catholics need to wake up from the illusion that the America we now live in — not the America of our nostalgia or imagination or best ideals, but the real America we live in here and now — is somehow friendly to our faith. What we're watching emerge in this country is a new kind of paganism, an atheism with air-conditioning and digital TV. And it is neither tolerant nor morally neutral.

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Archbishop Chaput at another point in his reflection quotes one of the most insightful and distinguished Catholic theologians of the Twentieth Century, John Courtney Murray, S.J.,

Anyone who really believes in God must set God, and the truth of God, above all other considerations...Our American culture, as it exists, is actually the quintessence of all that is decadent in the culture of the Western Christian world. Its achievement may be summed up thus: It has gained a continent and lost its own soul.

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In such a culture, normalized evil is justified, propagated and glorified ceaselessly by way of Super Bowls and soap operas news broadcasts and comedy sitcoms, commercials and cartoons, documentaries and celebrities, school curricula and even Christian religious education courses. Without extraordinary and energetic measures to counter the calculated promotion of normalized anti-Gospel untruth by proclaiming in word and deed unvarnished and uncompromising Gospel truth, most Christians will spend their lives engaged at one level or another of doing evil believing that they are doing good under the auspices of Jesus Christ. In such a culture Christians become easy prey for the purveyors of the “goodness,” indeed the “necessity,” of normalized evil.

But a Christian with a malformed Christian conscience is not in his or her right mind. A malformed Christian conscience is a frightful thing to behold. Like a spiritual piranha, it voraciously and relentlessly devours the Christian’s mind and life snippet by snippet, until he or she experiences evil as good, and believes that the opposite of what Jesus taught is what Jesus taught. Great Lent is a time to get back into our right mind.

To do this our examination of conscience and consciousness must, with the help of the Holy Spirit, try to uncover any hidden but normalized evil(s) in which we are participating. This is a major spiritual and moral crisis that the individual Christian and the local Church has to confront wherever they are situated in life. It is well established that in the Christian spiritual life the wickedness and snares, the cunning and cruelty of the devil can and do operate through what a society has constructed or accepted as normal. This is a life-and-death problem, temporally and eternally. It compels a continuous hearing and an airing in every Christian community.

As your Bishop, as one who deeply cares about the salvation of your souls and the souls of all people through Jesus Christ, my dream is that after this Great Lent, we Romanian Catholics of the Eparchy of St. George, myself included, can work together on practical programs in our parishes, in our Diocese, in our religious education curricula—at all levels—that will enable us, myself included, to be better followers of Our Lord, by helping one another discern where the traps of normalized evil exist in the various societies in which we participate, and how, by the grace of God, to break free of them.

The question we Romanian Catholics need to be asking ourselves is: are our parishes schools of life-giving repentance, spiritual “field hospitals” where our wounds, whether self- or other-inflicted, may be exposed to the healing light of Christ? Or are they simply places where the “normal” is canonized, where the rich symbols of our faith are used to

mask evil and make it appear religiously legitimized, if not divine? And how will we answer that question?

I know this calls for a great, indeed a radical, transformation of our lives and of our parishes from “business as usual” as we know it. Such a transformation is only possible when we live out of the fruits of a radically transformed reality. It is that reality to which I wish to turn my attention in my next pastoral letter, the one I will write for Easter. In the meantime, let us contemplate this invitation to conversion expressed in the Great Canon of Repentance of St. Andrew of Crete, one of the great spiritual and liturgical texts of this holy season:

I have walked in the footsteps of bloody Cain, by deliberate choice, killing the conscience of my soul, living according to the flesh, and making war upon my soul by my evil actions.

R: Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me

O Jesus, I have not resembled Abel in his righteousness. I have never offered You acceptable gifts nor holy deeds, a pure sacrifice or an unblemished life.

R: Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me

O wretched soul, like Cain, we have offered defiled actions, a polluted sacrifice and a worthless life to the Creator of all; for this, we stand condemned.

R: Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me

As the potter molds the clay, so You fashioned me, giving me flesh and bones, breath and life. But accept me in repentance, O my Creator, Redeemer and Judge!

R: Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me

With prayers and blessing for a fruitful season,

+john michael
a sinner,
bishop