

Pastor's Notes: Truth AND Compassion

April 10, 2022

There is oftentimes a false dichotomy presented when dealing with cultural and sociological issues. Either you're right or you're left, liberal or conservative, emphasize emotional arguments or emphasize rational arguments. But this false dichotomy fails to acknowledge the very Catholic adage: "both/and." As I mentioned in the past two pastor's notes, the truth will set us free, but the truth comes forth from the mouth of the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose Sacred Heart beats with divine love and compassion for all humanity. It is a true statement to say that the truths of the Catholic faith will set us free. But that statement cannot be said in a cold and detached way and be expected to take root in the hearts of sinners in need of that saving remedy. This is where compassion comes in.

It must be both truth AND compassion that guide the pastoral work of the Catholic Church. We tend to spend an inordinate amount of time pointing the finger at those, even amongst us, who would readily abandon the proclamation of the hard truths of faith and morals. That would be akin to pointing out the speck in our brother's eye while ignoring the plank in our own. We who are the inheritors of the sacred deposit of faith handed down faithfully through apostolic tradition rejoice in the orthodoxy of sacred doctrine that enlightens the mind and frees us from the darkness of error. But this is not the whole of the equation. Just as there is a liturgical adage, *lex orandi* (the law of prayer), *lex credendi* (the law of belief), to which a third movement is added, *lex vivendi* (the law of living), so, too, those who profess right beliefs must also allow God's grace, enlightened by the faith, to transform their actions as they live in this valley of tears. That is, a necessary companion to orthodoxy (right belief) is orthopraxy (right practice). It is troubling to see in our day so many people reacting badly to the truths presented by the Catholic faith and the moral demands of the Gospel message. Many will make a false dichotomy between orthopraxy (right practice) and orthodoxy (right belief), as if to say, it's not important to believe certain truths or propositions of faith. They will say that the only thing important is the way you act. But as you and I both know, what you believe necessarily informs the way you act. And often, those who would pit orthopraxis (right practice) against orthodoxy (right belief) are those who have rejected orthodoxy (right belief).

Dr. Richard Bulzacchelli is a professor of Theology at Aquinas College in Nashville and runs a fantastic YouTube channel called Catholic Studies Academy. In a recent video*, he combats the idea that orthopraxy (right practice) is superior to orthodoxy (right belief). In that video, he mentions that there are many who would propose that the Gospel is more about adjusting our behaviors than informing our faith. It's true, orthodoxy without orthopraxy tends towards Pharasaicalism. This person is often characterized as rigid or cold, and the outward profession of faith is not backed up by good works. This one-sidedness is condemned by St. James in his letter when he said that faith without works is dead. Conversely, it is also true that orthopraxy without orthodoxy devolves into an esoteric do-gooder mentality that cares little about the truth and even tends to relativize it. There are words like "non-judgmental" or "tolerant" used to describe that person. However, Dr. Bulzacchelli points out, both of these points of view are "straw man" arguments. Both right belief and right practice are needed if we are to live the fullness of the Catholic Christian faith. The first straw man that needs to be toppled is that orthodoxy is bad. Orthodoxy simply means that someone's attitude toward God is in accord with foundational Christian proclamation as presented by the Apostles and their successors. It also means that a person values God correctly. Orthopraxis is often held up as the greater indicator of sanctity, because it is the living out of what is rightly believed. There is always an issue with hypocrisy, that is, saying one thing but doing another. But true conversion comes from *metanoia*, that is, the conversion of mind and soul, which melds orthodoxy with orthopraxis so much that the distinctions disappear. Orthopraxis is a natural outflowing of orthodoxy, not something that stands in opposition to it. If we believe proposition X, we will then act accordingly. However, we cannot base our eternal salvation solely upon the acting rightly, as this would lead us into numerous heresies, such as Pelagianism and Novatianism. The reality is: Our faith and trust in God and the truths He reveals to us are the necessary precursor to right action in His sight when we cooperate with His grace. Sometimes we fail in our practices; but our salvation is not dependent on our actions, but rather on our faith. To that end, alcoholics, drug addicts, people struggling with sins of the flesh or anger or laziness—all have a path to heaven, if they rightly confess that these are wrong paths and trust in God's mercy. But to deny that these moral truths bind us or to excuse behaviors out of a place of heterodoxy or rejection of propositions that come from the sacred deposit of faith would actually exclude us from salvation. Unless you repent and believe, you will not have life within you. (cf Mk 1:15)

The orthodox man has a tendency to go to confession more often than the one who emphasizes only orthopraxy, for the obvious reason that the orthodox man sees that his behavior is not in accord with that which he rightly believes. Conversely, those who only emphasize orthopraxy often have a very narrow understanding of what needs to be confessed and de-emphasize sin, usually to the point of defining it as merely those things *they* don't do. In this way of thinking, there is an abhorrence of suffering, and compassion turns into attempting to alleviate all suffering instead of seeing suffering for the right thing as a path to salvation. Of course, that last statement is the very essence of the word compassion, and it is the reason why defining compassion as trying to alleviate suffering is a false understanding—pseudo-compassion. "Having a heart" cannot mean "losing our head." In fact, if we were to follow our heart without the necessary information from our head, we would fall into folly, just as much as ignoring the demands of our heart would lead to our demise. What is needed for our day is not more heart and less mind, but rather true *metanoia*, that is, the total conversion of both heart and mind. I think you would agree with me that Dr. Bulzacchelli has hit the nail on the head. It is precisely what I have attempted to preach: truth AND compassion.



* "Right Belief vs. Right Behavior? Why That's a False Choice You Should Not Accept", Dr. Richard Bulzacchelli, Catholic Studies Academy; <https://youtu.be/C0i0HSSHD6o> (accessed 4/3/22)