

“Catholic Social Teaching, Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy
as Mission, and the Family”

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I. Introduction

Good morning. I would like to thank Christian Meert and NACFLM for their kind invitation to speak to you today. To my mind, your apostolic efforts on behalf of marriage and family are among the most important in the Church, and I would commend to you the rich heritage of Catholic social teaching as a resource for deepening and fortifying your work.

As it is popularly understood, Catholic social teaching concerns the things associated with the category of social justice: alleviating poverty, combatting racism, assisting migrants or, from

an earlier era, supporting the labor movement, demanding “wages and hours” legislation, and endorsing a redistributive tax policy. Historically, these endeavors have been associated with left-of-center politics, and to many they are considered separate from, if not in some tension with, other seemingly “conservative” areas of Church teaching, such as those on sexuality, marriage, procreation, and family.

This perceived separation or tension is a serious mistake, for at the heart of the Church’s understanding of a just social order is precisely marriage and the family—a fact that distinguishes Catholic social thought in the most basic ways from the reigning philosophy of our day: liberalism. I use the term “liberalism” in a technical sense, not adjectivally to describe someone who would favor, say, politically liberal causes, like a strict environmental policy. I am referring, rather, to a philosophical movement that began in the 17th century and has over time eclipsed the classical, Catholic vision of the world. Its assumptions about human beings, God, nature,

politics, and law have permeated virtually every sector of our culture and constitute an enormous challenge to the good work you are doing.

II. The Sad Masquerade

As I will explain, liberalism is a philosophy that is premised upon and produces division. Let me make this concrete by way of a contemporary example. To my mind, the logic of liberalism is nowhere more evident than in the tragic case of Bruce Jenner whose life story appears riddled with divisions of various kinds and whose public gender “transition,” as it is called, has, in turn, fostered another set of divisions.

For our purposes, I will highlight only a few facts about his life, and I want to make very clear that I am not assigning blame to Jenner. It is the tragic situation of a grievously wounded man, and for all I know, his culpability is very low. I refer to it because it reveals so strikingly the underlying maladies of our culture. Bruce Jenner has been married and divorced three times, each union

producing two children. Though I am not an expert on his biography, I think it is safe to assume that when he married his third wife, he did not bring his children in tow; to that point in the timeline, then, two wives and four children—and, indeed, Jenner himself, a husband and a father—had endured painful separation and division concerning their most intimate bonds. Another round of this would follow in the third marriage, but its demise would be accompanied by the public revelation of a deep fragmentation within Jenner's own person—a division of his psyche from his body and soul.

Consider for a moment the ripple effects of his decision.

Not only is Jenner now fragmented in an outward, explicit way, but his six children are now bereft of an integrated father; his family of origin is bereft of their son and brother. His friends and fellow athletes are now separated from the man they knew, trained with, competed against. The past has been violently severed from the present.

It was, of course, Bruce Jenner (the man) who attended Graceland College on a football scholarship and won the gold medal in the men's decathlon in the '76 Olympics. And it is Bruce Jenner (the man) who may develop prostate cancer, but will never develop ovarian cancer. No matter. We are pressured to deny this; we are pressured into complicity in a wounded man's fragmentation and self-mutilation.

In a move that would cause the most cynical Soviet minister of propaganda to blush, journalists covering the story engaged in a shameful denial of reality, separating speech from truth and words from facts. Politicians were all too eager to capitalize on the opportunity (think of the "bathroom bills" proposed at the time) and foist a further fragmentation on the public who were now forced to divide the plain evidence of their senses from their reasoning.

Why do I contend that this sad affair is the result of a philosophical error? Because the way a culture acts reflects the way it thinks. Consider this astonishing statement made by the US

Supreme Court in its 1992 *Casey* decision reaffirming abortion rights. With breathtaking boldness, the justices declare: “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. Beliefs about these matters could not define the attributes of personhood were they formed under compulsion of the State.” Let’s let that sink in. There is a constitutional right to kill innocent human beings because we all have the right to decide what reality is.

The Bruce Jenner affair and the *Casey* decision alike are the logical outworking of the philosophical system of liberalism, which has radically overturned the classical, Catholic tradition against which it revolted so vigorously four hundred years ago. Please permit a necessarily brief and simplified summary, both of the tradition and the revolt.

III. Tradition and Revolt

According to a Catholic vision, richly informed by the insights of the ancients, especially Plato and Aristotle, the world is a place of order and wonder. It issues from God's gratuitous love, as a gift, and it bears the mark of his wisdom. How? The world is populated with a breathtaking array of created things, each of which enjoys a nature, that is, a recognizable structure and directionality, or goal, designed to work in a symphonic whole.

To take a basic example, a dog or a fish or a man each have different natures and require different conditions for the full flowering of those natures. Each of them requires water, nutrition, movement, and a supportive habitat to live. But man requires more. To live *well*, he needs not only material provisions but spiritual, because he is more than matter. He is a complex unity of body and soul, equipped by God with reason, desire, and will. For him to flourish, each aspect of his person needs to work in harmony interiorly, just as he—as a complex whole—needs to live in harmony with the larger order that sustains him, including the

natural, intellectual, moral, and spiritual order. To achieve this kind of human flourishing is a formidable and ongoing task; indeed, it is the task of a lifetime.

But man is not alone. As the ancients recognized, he is, by nature, social. He develops his capacities well—let's call these virtues—within a network of social relations, including marriage, family, kinship network, school, guild, church, and the larger political community. The latter has the crucially important role of fostering the happiness of its citizens through law by encouraging them in virtue and discouraging vice.

Not so, says Thomas Hobbes. Writing in 1651, Hobbes launches a frontal assault on classical and Christian metaphysics, ethics, and politics—in that order. A materialist, he denies the existence of an immaterial soul and thus jettisons the integrating principle undergirding personal identity; instead, he proposes a mechanistic model for understanding the human. Man is reduced to matter in motion, and his ethical convictions are likewise reduced to

stimulus responses. What strikes the individual as pleasurable will be adjudged good; what strikes him as painful will be deemed evil. There is no right and wrong, noble and base in the things themselves; there are only physiological states of pleasure and pain on the part of the judging subject.

What is more, there is no natural telos or goal of human life and no objective moral order to which our thinking, desiring, and acting should conform in order to yield happiness. As Hobbes puts it with characteristic bluntness, “[T]he Felicity of this life, consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied. For there is no such Finis ultimus, (utmost ayme,) nor Summum Bonum, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosphers.” [These are the very presuppositions that animate the thinking of both Bruce Jenner and the Supreme Court.]

In a world of finite goods and unlimited desires, conflict inevitably arises, rendering life in the state of nature “solitary, poore,

nasty, brutish, and short.”¹ To avoid such conflict is precisely the rationale for entering society—which is not organically developed among men who are by nature social. Rather, it is formed by individuals through a contract, an agreement forged to ensure the security of the contracting parties who mutually forfeit a portion of their liberty in order to gain the protection of a powerful sovereign or state.

The other founding figures of liberalism were less forthright than Hobbes, but they were no less radical, and their thinking about the matters most pertinent to your work has decisively shaped contemporary culture. As you will see, the basic individualism at work in liberalism’s political bonds also penetrates its understanding of marriage and the family.

Let us take two representative samples from Locke and Rousseau, writing in the 17th and 18th centuries, respectively. Given the era in which he was writing, it is striking that Locke favorably

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin Books), 160; 186.

entertains the notion that the marriage contract is limited and revocable. Its principal end being the procreation and rearing of children, once the couple's offspring reach maturity, he argues, the reason for the union disappears. And so Locke wonders why the conjugal bond might not be made, as he puts it, "determinable, either by consent, or at a certain time, or upon certain Conditions, as well as any other voluntary Compacts, *there being no necessity in the nature of the thing*, nor to the ends of it, that it should always be for life" (emphasis added).²

What Locke proposes for marriage, Rousseau proposes also for the family. "The most ancient of all societies and the only natural one," he observes, "is that of the family." So far so good. But wait. "Even so children remain bound to their father only so long as they need him to take care of them. As soon as the need ceases, the natural bond is dissolved. Once the children are freed from the obedience they owed the father and their father is freed from the

² John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* in *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 321.

care he owed his children, all return equally to independence. If they continue to remain united,” he adds, “this no longer takes place naturally but voluntarily, and the family maintains itself only by means of convention.”³

Once again, we see that liberal theory’s conception of man is basically individualistic and for this reason incapable of sustaining a conception of marriage and the family as enduring institutions. Underlying its individualism, as we have seen, is a basic denial of a Christian anthropology. Man is no longer an integrated whole, a substantial unity of body and soul, endowed with a fundamental orientation to the good. Nor is he in harmony with a moral order that binds him organically to his fellows. Rather, he is alone, an atom in a mechanistic universe “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

IV. The Revolution Hits Home

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract* in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Basic Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 142.

Perhaps this would be no great loss if it were confined to the realm of theory, if it were an intellectual experiment of sorts. But, in fact, liberalism's anthropology has been hugely influential on the thinking and practice of Western culture and, arguably, on America in particular.

One finds its influence wreaking havoc on marriage law beginning forty years ago when California adopted the nation's first no-fault divorce statutes. The political became eminently personal and so the old adage was inverted, "As the nation went, so went the family." With no-fault divorce law, gone were the moral considerations that had previously governed the state's judgments. While the U.S. had traditionally permitted civil divorce only in cases involving a "serious breach of moral duties, such as adultery, cruelty, or desertion," now a marriage could be dissolved unilaterally by a simple appeal to "irreconcilable differences." What had been understood as a "right to remain married" was now trumped by a new "right to divorce." As Michael Sandel helpfully

summarizes, “The old law treated persons as situated selves, whose identity as legal persons was tied to their roles as husbands, wives, and parents. The new law loosens the relation between the self and its roles; it makes family roles easier to shed and relaxes the obligations that attach to them.”⁴

The image of the self as an autonomous contract-maker (and breaker) might seem a novelty. Yet though it emerged in American family law in the 1970s, it had been prefigured in social contract theory centuries before. This suggests that the problem of casual divorce and family breakdown is not simply a matter of current law—as if tightening up the legal framework would suffice to remedy it—but rather penetrates American law and politics all the way down to its philosophical roots. What is required to counteract the divorce culture, then, is an alternative anthropology, a different vision of man that can serve as the wellspring for a fundamentally

⁴ Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a New Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 109; 112.

different view of marriage, family, and political community.

Catholic social teaching offers precisely this alternative.

V. Homecoming: Man as Made for Communion

The difference between the solitary, anxious, self-protective individual of the social contract and the Catholic vision of man appears in high relief in the first chapters of Genesis, which reveal a simple but revolutionary anthropological fact: man is made for communion. The reason he is intrinsically sociable is evident, though implicit, in a phrase that might escape notice on first reading. It appears in what is a unique preface before the creation of man. “Then God said, ‘Let *us* make man in our image, after our likeness’” (emphasis added). For Catholics, this phrase reveals the extraordinary mystery of the Trinity. God, who is a communion of persons, created man in his image and likeness and so *for* communion. Genesis elaborates on the point: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and

female he created them.”⁵ After the creation, God declares his handiwork good; after the creation of man, he declares it *very* good. The imago Dei is found in the complementary persons of man and woman, revealed symbolically *in their flesh*.

This fact is brought to life narratively in the second creation story. Having breathed life into Adam and having placed him in the garden to tend it, God realizes, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” God fashions a variety of creatures—birds of the air, beasts of the field—to serve this purpose, “but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him.” So God caused a deep sleep to come over the man, removed one of his ribs, and created woman. Upon seeing the woman, the man, Adam, fairly exclaims, “This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh”! And the text affirms their fittingness for one another, the rightness of their coupling, as it explains, “Therefore, a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.”

⁵ *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1965), 1:26, 1:27.

This one-flesh union is by its nature fruitful, a fact made evident by the blessing God bestows upon man and woman in the first creation account. The couple is to be “fruitful and multiply.”⁶ The society of man and wife is rounded out, fulfilled when it issues in new life. In this way, the particular similitude human beings bear to God is most evident: the family testifies to the communion of persons in the divine Trinity.

The creation accounts of Genesis confirm the deeply social nature of man. We are created in the image of a relational God and bear an ordination for interpersonal communion in the very structure of our (sexually differentiated) bodies. This begins in marriage, the primary unit of social life in Catholic social teaching.⁷

Unlike liberal political theory, the Church recognizes marriage as pre-political, divinely ordained, and endowed with essential attributes, such as permanence, fidelity, and fruitfulness, which reflect God’s relationship with his people. The positive law cannot

⁶ Genesis 2:18, 2:20, 2:23, 2:24; 1:28.

⁷ See Anthony Esolen’s very helpful and beautifully written exposition of this point in *Reclaiming Catholic Social Teaching: A Defense of the Church’s True Teachings on Marriage, Family, and the State* (Sophia Institute Press, 2014).

alter these characteristics; they are natural, intrinsic to the institution itself.

The Church also recognizes the family as the first natural society and “the primary place of humanization for the person.” It is the “cradle of life and love”⁸ in which children receive their human formation, first hearing the Gospel announced through the words and witness of their parents, learning the virtues, and experiencing what it means to love and be loved as whole persons. (Children are not loved generically, but specifically, as this little boy, “David,” or this little girl, “Eva.”)

In stark contrast to the tentative ties connecting the liberal family, a Catholic conception of the family rests directly on enduring bonds and duties that “are not limited by the terms of a contract.”⁹ The family is a crucial witness to the kind of relationships rooted in Christian love, relationships “lived in gratuitousness,” which, in the words of *Familiaris Consortio*, take

⁸ *Christifideles Laici*, 40.

⁹ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, ed. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Washington, DC: US Conference of Catholic Bishops), 96.

the form of “heartfelt acceptance, encounter and dialogue, disinterested availability, generous service, and deep solidarity.”¹⁰

The family is the school of charity. It is where the corporal and spiritual works of mercy are first witnessed and practiced amidst the “quotidian mysteries”¹¹ of domestic life. Children are clothed and fed and instructed; an elderly grandmother is nursed back to health; an anxious spouse is counseled; a wayward uncle is welcomed and corrected in fraternal charity; the family’s dead are mourned and prayed for; the bereaved are comforted. The habits of generous service cultivated in this little sphere will flow outward. Indeed, it is not too much to say that a home animated by love of this kind is a fount of mercy for the whole world. It is a little Nazareth and an icon of God’s very life, and it is a living solution to the problems posed by liberalism. In what way?

Let me answer this question by way of a closing summary.

Recall that a liberal anthropology is at root fragmented. The

¹⁰ *Familiaris Consortio*, 43.

¹¹ To use Kathleen Norris’s evocative phrase.

individual is reduced to parts, which can be manipulated at will (as we have seen in Bruce Jenner's case). It is likewise socially atomistic, which accounts for the basic suspicion of human relationships at work both in its political theory and its conception of marriage and family. Binding ties to another—citizen, spouse, child—threaten one's autonomy; hence the need to render all such relationships contingent. If the individual in liberalism is the fundamental reality, and if all social relationships are thus derivative, the product of the will, then it is no surprise that the logic of liberalism leads to the tentativeness of every tie, even to oneself.

On the other hand, if we are made in the image and likeness of a God who is a communion of persons, we can begin to heal the many fragmentations around us. We can be at home in our own persons—body and soul—and in this wholeness confect bonds that are not only *not* threatening to our well-being but are in fact our greatest fulfillment. It is the mission of Christian marriage and family life to bear witness to these realities. If our homes did so

more faithfully, the old adage would actually bear great hopefulness:

“As the family goes, so goes the nation.”