

November 18, 2011
Vol. 2, Issue 9

In this issue:

(Podcast) When Giving to the Church is the Result of Coercion

Stewardship in a Postmodern World: Affirming the Truth under a "Dictatorship of Relativism"

(GSN) November is Gratitude Month



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Stewardship in a Postmodern World: Affirming the Truth under a "Dictatorship of Relativism"

By **Howard Craig**

*Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be "tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine", seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires. (Ratzinger, Joseph Cardinal. *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, April, 2005)*

The day before he was elected Pope and received the name Benedict XVI, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger proposed the descriptive phrase "a dictatorship of relativism" to define the central threat of Postmodernism, the prevalent belief system of the early 21st Century. Postmodernism, a philosophical worldview that is highly skeptical of any system which claims to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, vehemently denies all truth statements in favor of a more enlightened position that all truth is relative to the individual. Nothing is definitive. There is no Truth.

It should be no surprise that the Church faces a challenge from relativism at the dawn of the 21st Century. As Rene Girard has pointed out, the predisposition towards relativism has evolved, in part, from the necessities of our time. Societies are mixed. A plurality of peoples and belief systems dwell side-by-side on the local and global stage. Mankind inhabits a truly "global village." Such diversity of beliefs living in close proximity to one another requires a sense of tolerance and, at the very least, an acknowledgment of the worth of the individual regardless of beliefs.

However, the "dictatorship of relativism" which Pope Benedict XVI speaks of is not this type of pluralistic tolerance that respects other beliefs. The dictatorship of relativism is Postmodernism taken to its logical conclusion, a conclusion that cannot tolerate the presence of *any* system that posits

Truth. The result is a dictatorial worldview that opposes all belief systems, including Christianity and the tenets of the Church. Postmodernism extends beyond a pluralistic tolerance. Postmodernism requires a dictatorship of relativism, an "indifferent tolerance" that refuses to believe there can be any superior Truth.

Thus, in a world where it is no longer fashionable to believe in anything other than yourself, where society frowns upon and sometimes makes it illegal for individuals to live out their beliefs, those who propose belief – any kind of belief – are viewed with mistrust, disregard, and occasionally anger for even the suggestion that there is Truth. The Christian belief system opposes, in direct counterpoint, this "indifferent tolerance" of relativism. Christian doctrine teaches that there is Truth. It goes even further to state unequivocally that we can experience and understand that Truth through Jesus Christ and the Sacraments of the Church. It is no surprise, therefore, to find animosity towards Christians. It is no wonder that Pope Benedict sounded the alarm.

The Church must offer response to this dictatorship of relativism. Recently, Pope Benedict reminded the Church: "The evangelization of culture is all the more important in our times, when a 'dictatorship of relativism' threatens to obscure the unchanging truth about man's nature, his destiny and ultimate good" (Pope Benedict XVI. *Mass Homily*, Glasgow, Scotland. September 16, 2010). It is not enough to "stand" against the tide of relativism. The threat against human identity and a future of hope is imperiled. The Christian must be involved *proactively*, and not just passively, to counter the dictatorship of relativism by evangelizing the very culture of our times.

The practice of Christian stewardship is the life-affirming response to this dictatorship of relativism. The Postmodern challenge of relativism requires a response that links the practice of Christian Stewardship to the clarion call for a New Evangelization. The

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battle for the life-affirming teachings of Sacred Scripture and the traditions of the Church will not be won solely in the public sector through skillful rhetoric and philosophical debate. As never before, victory must also be won in the minds and hearts of the many disillusioned, disheartened and disenfranchised peoples throughout the world. When the popular belief system teaches that the highest expression of love is self-love, that the highest form of good is self-actualization, and that all that matters is to "live and let live," an unequivocal, doctrinally sound Christian stewardship is required. The Christian disciple living out Christian stewardship is the most concrete representation of the teachings of our Lord who instructed his followers to provide for the homeless, to care for the widows and the orphans, to share with the destitute, to heal the sick, to proclaim freedom to the captives, to visit those in prison, to share light in the darkness, and to proclaim "this is the day of the Lord." The ultimate Truth of Christianity will be experienced as legions of the clergy and laity alike live out the Gospel message to "love your neighbor as yourself," shining forth in the midst of dark, impersonal, difficult times. A life of Christian Stewardship is the definitive stand taken by the individual which says, "This I believe. This is important to me. This is how I want to be remembered."

It is important at this point in the discussion to make clear distinctions between the many forms and strategies of fund-raising that are present in the postmodern world. Christian stewardship must address the disciple's use of money, as the main form of exchange in this present world is a transfer of funds in order to purchase goods and services. But stewardship is about much more than money. Stewardship, at its most basic, defines a lifestyle that affirms the relationship between the Giver, the Gifts, and the Receiver.

Stewardship, by its very definition, affirms the existence of the greater One. There can be no steward without a Lord. The existence

of the steward assumes that the properties and goods he is watching over are not his own – they belong to the Other, his Lord. There is no sense of stewardship until one affirms this most basic relationship. On this one point, the dictatorship of relativism must concede: if we are stewards of our world, we care for that world on behalf of another. Someone other than "me" and "mine" has intrinsic value. The Other exists. We are not our own, we owe a responsibility to the Other. This first affirmation of Stewardship begins to put the lie to the dictatorship of relativism.

Christian Stewardship teaches that everything in our life, all of our reality, is a gift from God. A prevailing concession in postmodern thinking involves an acknowledgment of the "Other" as some impersonal, theoretical life-force. Christian Stewardship opposes this view. The Other is not some unknowable, impersonal, force or karma. Christian stewardship affirms that a personal, knowable God is the greater One. This God is creator of the universe and all that is in it. But further, God allows us to know Him, to have a relationship to Him. He is not just a Creator who wound up reality and then walked away; He seeks to make Himself known to his creation, and to know His creation in return. Intrinsic to His revealed nature is his personal identity as provider, father and husband. He provides for Adam and Eve. Later he is known as the Good Shepherd who watches over the flock and provides for His sheep. He is the Father of Israel. And He is the Son of Man, the Servant of Israel. His is the one who gifts His children "with all good things." God is Giver. Indeed, the revealed nature of God answers that ages-old question, "If God is the owner of the 'cattle on a thousand hills,' why does He need my gift?" The only appropriate answer to this question is found in the nature and desire of God as Giver. God loves us and wants us to be like Him. An intrinsic part of the nature of God is that God is Giver. Therefore, God wants us to grow in our relationship to Him by becoming givers as he has given to us.

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Christian Stewardship affirms that the true Owner of our existence has expectations about its use and development. From the beginning, Sacred Scripture teaches that mankind is but a steward of God's creation, and that God has expectations about the way mankind will use and share His gifts. In His many encounters with Abraham, God teaches these truths. When Abraham is about to sacrifice his son, God provides a ram for the offering. At that moment, Abraham names God as "the One who Provides." Throughout God's encounter with Abraham, God promises a blessing upon Abraham and his descendents, both biological and spiritual. But God also makes this clear: His blessing is not to be squandered in selfish desire; His blessing comes with responsibility. God affirms that he is blessing Abraham so that through the descendants of Abraham, all nations will be blessed. (Genesis 12 ff). This theme of "blessed to be a blessing" runs like a golden thread throughout Sacred Scripture as God unfolds His purpose for His people. What we receive is not for our own good only; we are blessed so that we may bless others. God expects his stewards to nurture what they have been given, and share it with others with a sense of justice.

It is this concept of the benevolent care of God, that we are "blessed to be a blessing", which must shape and inform our acts of Christian Stewardship in our battle with the dictatorship of relevance. Stewards must communicate that they share their gifts of Time, Talent and Treasure because it is the intrinsic nature of God to care about His creation; our grateful response to His love in our own lives must be a visible expression of His care for our world. God is the first one who tells each of us to "Pay it Forward." Each act of Christian Stewardship must affirm that behind the Gift is the Giver. In the onslaught of the dictatorship or relevance, the reality of God and His intrinsic love for His creation can have no stronger argument than the concrete, specific acts of kindness and deliverance that occur in His name. Each act of kindness, each "cup of water"

given in His name, is vital. Evangelization at its most basic level occurs each time that the Christian community takes seriously the responsibility of Stewardship and is unequivocal in expressing such acts as the Acts of a loving God. These acts of sacrificial love given in His name are outward signs of the New Evangelization.

Christian Stewardship in the Twenty-First Century will require the Participation of the Disciple. S. Truett Cathy and Kenneth Blanchard are best known for their business acumen and their success in the corporate world. Cathy is the founder of the very successful fast-food chain *Chic-fil-A*. Kenneth Blanchard is the author of a multitude of One Minute Manager books. In 2002, Cathy and Blanchard co-wrote a small volume titled *The Generosity Factor*. In this parable, Blanchard and Cathy addressed the challenge of stewardship in a postmodern world. In their novel, a young businessman is challenged to live a life that has meaning. The young man's mentor in this novel proposes to his charge that it is no longer enough to share just Time, Talent and Treasure. He says that if one really wants to make a difference in his own world, he must be willing to Touch it as well.

This addition of a fourth element, Touch, to the classic "Time, Talent, and Treasure" equation of stewardship is profound. In the 21st Century, it is too easy to develop a proxy stewardship. Sharing of Time, Talent and Treasure becomes something we delegate or relegate to the periphery of life. It is much too easy in the current environment to "throw money at it" or just "pray for it." As Cathy and Blanchard so poignantly illustrate, our current world demands more. Indeed, authentic Christian stewardship in the 21st Century demands that the disciple be involved. It is time to share the Touch of Christ with the needy, the destitute, the demanding. Each disciple must be actively engaged; each must reach out and touch. Each steward must be willing to say, "I will become personally involved." Proxy stewardship is not sufficient and cannot fulfill

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an authentic call to be Christ to the world.

In conclusion, there is some glimmer of hope on the horizon. Our research at O'Meara Ferguson seems to indicate that this current postmodern generation is no longer content to simply "pray and give." They want to be a part of the solution. This postmodern generation wants to reach out; they seek to Touch. And it is just this type of participation and involvement that provides the strongest argument against the dictatorship of relativism. A fully-committed growing steward of Christ who is a part of the solution for a hurting, needy world is the best weapon in the battle against the dictatorship of relativism.

Today it is a matter of the greatest urgency to show a Christian model of life that offers a livable alternative to the increasingly vacuous entertainments of leisure-time society, a society forced to make increasing recourse to drugs because it is sated by the usual shabby pleasures.... The Christian model of life must be manifested as a life in all its fullness and freedom, a life that does not experience the bonds of love as dependence and limitation but rather as an opening to the greatness of life.

(Ratzinger, Cardinal Joseph. *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*. New York: Basic Books, 2006. pp. 125-126)