“The Salesian Spirit” ESSAY CONTEST

Revived in 2006, with the 40th anniversary of DeSales University and in conjunction with World Communications Day, the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture sponsors an annual writing contest for members of the campus community. World Communications Day is celebrated in most countries on the Sunday before Pentecost. The announcement of the theme is usually made on September 29, the Feast of the Archangels Michael, Raphael and Gabriel, who have been designated patrons of those who work in radio. The Holy Father’s message for World Communications Day is traditionally published on January 24, in conjunction with the Memorial of ST. FRANCIS DE SALES, patron of writers.

Theme for 2017

“Fear not for I am with you” (Isaiah 43:5)
COMMUNICATING HOPE & TRUST IN OUR TIME

“Best Student Essay” award

Turning Labels into Love:
The Hope of the Good News

by

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I didn’t use to think that Catholics were persecuted in the United States. In 2015, over 70 percent of the American population identifies as Christian, with 20.8 percent of that number identifying as Catholic, 5.9 percent identifying with a non-Christian faith and 22.8 percent identifying as unaffiliated (Wormald). Christianity is clearly the majority religion—how could a majority be persecuted? Not only that, but to me, to say that Christians or Catholics were persecuted seemed to insult other minority groups that have been persecuted in a violent and tangible way in America throughout history, often at the hands of the majority: Japanese-American citizens forced into internment camps during World War II, African-Americans subjugated as the inferior “other” in social hierarchy and policies from the first formative years of the colonies as recently the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s (with shades of this lingering in some parts of the country today). This is not even to mention the forms of persecution that have taken place globally: victims of apartheid in South Africa, targets during the Soviet Revolution, Syrian refugees displaced as a result of civil war.

Looking forward in the future—graduating in a short time and entering into a world that is not so unified in its beliefs like DeSales is—I have come to realize that even though the persecution of Catholics in America may not be comparable with any of the other forms of persecution I have listed above, it still exists in another, perhaps less combatable way. One example that showed this to me occurred only this year. Beginning in the 2016-2017 academic year, an on-campus publication of which I am an editor began printing articles that I did not personally agree with for a number of reasons, whether it be content, the way that facts were framed, or the way the facts were obtained (or not obtained). I tried to give my input in a number of ways. We need a quote for this article to show the other side. We should put “Opinion” in the title and put it on the editorials page instead of the news page. Some of
these suggestions were received; others were not. The result was a publication that was constantly and openly touting an agenda contrary to the Catholic tradition, which is the fuel and foundation of the university.

Upon finding out that an upcoming issue was planning to publish an editorial celebrating the Women’s March (an event with one of the primary intentions being to protest the threat that President Trump posed to accessible abortions and contraception), I decided to write an objective, news-reporting piece about the Pro-Life Club attending the March for Life. In this article was a quote from a student pointing out the negative effects that a woman may experience from an abortion, and from what I knew about the process of getting an abortion, these side effects were true and verifiable by a number of sources. In response to the publication of this article, a faculty member criticized it for being factually inaccurate and told the editor-in-chief to print a retraction. I was never approached by the faculty member or the editor about the supposed falsities in my article. I only found out about the retraction after it had already been written and I was tasked with proofreading it. I told the editor that I knew these facts to be true and could back them up with sources, but the retraction was printed anyway.

This example illustrates the way that Catholics—as well as Catholic messages and beliefs—are persecuted in modern America. They are not targeted physically, but the modern Catholic persecution is one of the intellect. My sources could not possibly have any true facts, the editor and faculty member implied, because they might have been religious sources disguising themselves as medical sources, and of course religion and facts are opposed to one another; therefore, I was disregarded in the “debate” of what constitutes legitimate and truthful information. This is evidence of a greater tension between American
culture and the Catholic Church today. In an article for America: The Jesuit Review, Fr. James Martin, SJ, points out that “in a pluralistic society the church’s emphasis on the one, eternal truth can strike some as difficult to comprehend.” Despite outside forces seeing it as irrational and opposed to intellectual faculties, The Church is focused on finding the eternal and objective truth, while contemporary secular society professes allegiance to many (and sometimes conflicting) “truths.” In this society, those who believe that there is only one truth—implying that those beliefs that do not accord with the one truth are incorrect—are at odds with the relativistic tolerance preached all across America in variegated arenas, and those people must be dismissed in any way possible. Catholics are labeled as unreasonable and illogical, hateful and bigoted, and these labels exclude Catholic voices from public discussion.

Pope Francis’ message for the 51st World Day of Social Communications dispels both of these sets of labels for Catholics in his gentle and humble way. “The early Christians compared the human mind to a constantly grinding millstone,” the Holy Father writes. “It is up to the miller to determine what it will grind: good wheat or worthless weeds. Our minds are always ‘grinding,’ but it is up to us to choose what to feed them.” The image of the human mind constantly grinding like a millstone speaks to the human desire to know. The Thomist metaphysician Fr. W. Norris Clarke, SJ, quoting another Thomist metaphysician Jacques Maritain, writes, “‘There is a nuptial relationship between the mind and reality’ that longs to be consummated” (39). It is only the human mind that can reach for this truth found in reality, and we have a natural desire to do so. Thomistic metaphysics rejects the pessimistic approach to reality found in the Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant who says that “it is impossible for the human mind to know the real world as it is in itself... Rather we
positively impose our own a priori unifying forms to both sense and intellect on the raw, *in itself unintelligible* manifold of sense experience... we cannot reach beyond what appears in our own minds” (Clarke 38, emphasis mine). If we see the world as unintelligible, to impose our own structure upon it individually, not only does this lead to an ontological narcissism, but also to a meaningless existence. I am the God of the world, molding it to what I want it to be; to what should I mold it? What difference does it make if I impose this system or that? Everything becomes arbitrary and without any fixed content. Likewise, if we impose our own truth upon the world, then it is the same thing as saying that there is no truth, for why should your truth be correct when mine, in direct opposition to yours, could be correct instead?

To refute the claims of hate and bigotry associated with most Catholics today, Pope Francis draws from Romans when he says in his World Day of Social Communications message, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts (cf. Rom 5:5) and makes new life blossom, like a shoot that springs up from the fallen seed.” Catholicism recognizes God’s love that lives within us, made possible by the sacrifice of his son Jesus, and we are called to be Jesus to all of those who we encounter. Our university's patron's most often used phrase is “Vive Jesu”—live Jesus. What better way to live Jesus than to show sacrificial, agapic love to all those we encounter? Pope Francis continues to speak on the subject of love, specifically how it can transform those who profess it: “…love can find a way to draw near and to raise up sympathetic hearts, resolute faces and hands ready to build anew.” Love is ready to forgive the mistakes of the past and transform them into strengths for the future; Love Itself in the form of Jesus Christ agreed to die a painful, by no means necessary death upon a cross just so we could have the opportunity to be forgiven for our sins. A tradition that holds this
as one of its founding tenants cannot be called hateful or bigoted; it is only through love that Catholicism can flourish.

In a world where Catholics are bound with labels of hate and ignorance, what can we do to persevere? Our Holy Father turns us to the “good news,” the Gospels. Pope Francis tells us that the only lens through which we can “read” reality—through which we can see the conflict-ridden world we live in—is “the good news, beginning with the Good News par excellence: ‘the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God’ (Mk 1:1).” We may find it impossible to see good news or hope around us, but Pope Francis reminds us of the constant presence of Jesus in our world today: “In Christ, God has shown his solidarity with every human situation. He has told us that we are not alone, for we have a Father who is constantly mindful of his children. ‘Fear not, for I am with you’ (Is 43:5): these are the comforting words of a God who is immersed in the history of his people.” God sees the struggles of our world today: divided by political issues, our most vulnerable populations suffering, and the people who can offer the most hope (Catholics) persecuted and shouted down until our message of love is either ignored or derided. God sees these things and loves anyway. “In Christ,” Pope Francis says, “even darkness and death become a point of encounter with Light and Life. Hope is born, a hope accessible to everyone, at the very crossroads where life meets the bitterness of failure.”

This is not to say, by any means, that to see hope and love in the world is easy: it is perhaps one of the hardest choices one can make. My reaction to my article being dismissed as slanted, religious proselytism and being ignored when defending myself was immediately anger towards those who opposed me. But after speaking with friends and mentors, I realized that more likely than not those who opposed me are suffering in some way. They
may have had a friend or family member involved in having an abortion, or they themselves might be suffering from the side effects that they wish to deny. Whatever the case, Christ is with those who suffer. Suffering “is seen as an integral part of Jesus’ love for the Father and for all mankind,” says Pope Francis. To be Jesus to others, we must also give compassion to those who are suffering, even those who reject that compassion. This is the way that we will unyoke ourselves from the labels that secular society gives Catholics, but more importantly, this is the way that we will evangelize the world and reclaim the good news within a life in Christ. “The Kingdom of God is already present in our midst,” says Pope Francis, “like a seed that is easily overlooked, yet silently takes root. Those to whom the Holy Spirit grants keen vision can see it blossoming. They do not let themselves be robbed of the joy of the Kingdom by the weeds that spring up all about.”

REFERENCES: