

*Address to the Christian Gathering in Parc Ahuntsic, Montreal, on 20 June 2015, by Douglas Farrow, Kennedy Smith Chair in Catholic Studies, McGill University.*

Chers amis en Christ, je vous remercie d'avance pour m'avoir permis de vous adresser en anglais. This, I suspect, will be easier for you. It will certainly be easier for me!

We are gathered here to show solidarity with our persecuted brethren around the world. And to encourage each other to assume our responsibility as Christians in our own society. These two things are connected.

One way in which they are connected – a rather sad way – is that our brethren, in lands where chaos and violence prevail, have little opportunity to influence their world, save by letting go of everything, their homes and businesses, even their lives, in faithfulness to Christ. Whereas we, who have every opportunity, often do not take it. We are too busy entertaining ourselves, enjoying the peace that still prevails, to concern ourselves with whether and how that peace can last, or with whether and how it can be made to serve the good of others besides ourselves. They need our prayers, that the loss of their outward peace may strengthen their inner peace. We need their prayers, that we be not destroyed inwardly by our outward peace.

Another and happier way in which the two themes are connected is that, if we do influence our own world for Christ, we may hope also in that way, as well as by our prayers and our gifts, to influence their world too. The West has many resources. If only it had the will and the courage and the generosity to stand in solidarity with the peoples ravaged by the *soi disant* Islamic State and other forces of evil and suffering, it could do very much more than it is doing.

In his new encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis points out that we have not the will to deal with the mounting environmental crises because we have not the moral culture, the moral clarity, the moral fibre, to face the root causes – which are first of all spiritual. We do not receive what we have as a gift, nor are we properly thankful. It is our lack of attention to the two great commandments, to the love of God and the love of neighbour, that leads to the lack of respect for our physical environment also. And, we may add, it is the same lack of attention to the two great commandments that produces our

paralysis in the face of those evil ideologies that, exploiting corruption in high places, lead to the breakdown of civil order and civil peace.

I have been asked to speak to our responsibility here at home, and to certain difficulties that we face. Since I must be very brief, I want to gather these together under one head: the need to be fearless in speaking the name of Jesus Christ. If we are not fearless when there is relatively little to fear, how shall we be fearless when, by human reckoning, there is much to fear?

We are Christians. To be a Christian is to believe that this world, and all who live in it, need Jesus Christ. It is to believe that people need the salvation God has worked for man, and indeed for the whole creaturely habitat, in Jesus Christ. Our neighbours have many needs, no doubt. And there are many ways of helping them with their needs. But they, like we, have no need greater than the need for Jesus Christ. And there is no greater gift that has been given to us than Jesus Christ. We are members of his ambassadorial mission. We have a message to bring to them about his kingdom – the kingdom that is coming and shall have no end.

Now this is not easy, to be sure. There are at least two reasons why it is not easy.

First, we all know the experience of encountering someone who needs to hear of Jesus Christ, and of being afraid to speak of him. Why afraid? Because moving the conversation to that level may make demands on us that we are not ready to face.

Second, because we find ourselves today in a society where it is considered not only impolite, but impolitic, to mention God at all, never mind to speak of Emmanuel, God with us. We live in a pluralistic society, a secular society, a society that fancies itself neutral, for all public and official purposes, about God and about religion generally. This is a society that cannot give thanks – that has made rules against giving thanks, that forbids public prayer by public officials, that rejects laws and policies and public education reflective of religious commitments.

But why do I say “fancies itself neutral”? That’s easy: Because it is not possible to be neutral about God. The state that says, or the society that says, that it is neutral about God is lying.

Let me explain. To say that we can have a state or a society that is neutral about God is to say that God, if there is a God, has no claim upon that state or society. Such a state or society has committed itself, then, to this theological premise – this false theological premise. It can say whatever it likes about “the rule of law,” but if it denies “the supremacy of God” it not only denies, at least in Canada’s case, its own constitution; it is well on the way to becoming the Man of Lawlessness against which St Paul warned us in 2 Thessalonians, the man “who exalts himself against every so-called god.”

Now what is true for the state or for society is true for the men and women who make up society. We cannot be neutral about God. And we, as Christians, must be fearless in saying so, in public as in private. What is more, as members of the Church, as members of various *ecclesiae* – of the civic assemblies of the kingdom of God and of his Christ – we cannot hide behind vague language about God. We cannot dictate to the state the language that it uses. But our own language must be clear and specific. Yes, we believe in God, and not just in any so-called god, but in “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This is the God of Moses also, the God of the two great commandments. Without some measure of faith, gratitude, and obedience to that God, our neighbours and our society cannot prosper morally. And if they cannot prosper morally, they cannot fail to do themselves and us, and indeed the planet, much harm. Again, we must be fearless in saying so, for it is true. But with some measure of faith and gratitude and obedience they can and will prosper, rebuilding the moral culture that is required to preserve peace and to bring peace where there is no peace.

It is of special importance that we speak up in the sphere of education and of family life. Why? Because that is where the private and the public intersect, and that is where the next generation is formed. Do you think it any accident that these are the very spheres in which Judeo-Christian faith and morality are under sustained assault?

I was very thankful for the recent victory of Loyola High School in the Supreme Court of Canada, a case in which I was privileged to be involved. I am deeply concerned, however, as a Catholic Christian, that the Catholic Church, which pioneered public education in this country, has in its own schools largely abandoned a genuinely

Catholic education. I am deeply concerned, but not surprised, that even Catholics do not know how to resist the growing forces of secularism.

Not only of secularism, but of gnosticism: that open disdain for the Creator, and for the givenness of the body, with which the earliest Christians were already confronted, in a movement that sought to penetrate the Church and drive it off course – all this has reappeared today, seizing its opportunity in our contraceptive culture. And we have to a great extent capitulated and cooperated; just as we are beginning to capitulate to the techno-scientific culture whose ambitions, in some quarters, do not stop short of “liberating” man from the body altogether.

We need to rebuild an authentically Christian culture among ourselves, before we can hope to help rebuild Canadian culture.

Well, I have tried to say some of these things in *Desiring a Better Country*, which will appear from McGill-Queen’s in the autumn. I invite you to look at that. But what I want to say now, in conclusion – I say this to bishops and priests and to the faithful alike – is that we must follow St Paul’s example. We must preach Christ, and him crucified. We must preach Christ, resurrected and ascended to the right hand of God. We must not be afraid.

“Do not fear,” said Jesus, “those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

“When I am afraid,” said the Psalmist, “I put my trust you: in God, whose word I praise. In God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me?”

“Be not afraid!”, exhorted St John Paul: “Open, indeed, open wide the doors to Christ! Open to his saving power the confines of states, and systems political and economic, as well as the vast fields of culture, civilization, and development. Be not afraid!”