MAINTAINING BALANCE

Catholics are people who live sacramentally. We believe that God reveals divine life and truth through human life and through our use of the good things of earth. In Christ, we believe that human beings can be and are sacraments of the divine presence. In our sacraments, we trust bread and wine, oil and water, and one another to reveal and even be the presence of Christ among us. In our preaching, we use human words to speak divine truth. Priests, especially, should be believers in the incarnation and in the sacramental presence of Christ among us through human signs that will become for us, through the work of the Holy Spirit, “the bread of life,” “our spiritual drink,” “our sacrifice” “for the praise and glory of [God’s] name, for our good and the good of all his holy Church.” We celebrate dialogic liturgy, addressing God in human speech, anticipating the divine response, watching for ways in which God is at work transforming our world. We should embrace what is good in our culture, what is capable of bearing the weight of divine presence or of pointing us to that presence, what best expresses the truth of salvation that we proclaim.

But recently, several bishops have urged priests to be or become countercultural. Back in October 2011, addressing the priests of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, described the Church as standing in a “field of battle” which is to be found in the “secret landscape of [the human] spirit.” Priests, on this battlefield, “must accept the impression of being in the midst of people as one who starts from a logic and speaks a language that is different from that of others. . . . What people expect from him is, in fact, that he not be ‘like others.’” Such a countercultural stance is increasingly necessary, Cardinal Piacenza said, in a “world” in which “secularization, gnosticism, atheism, in their various forms, are increasingly reducing the space of the sacred [and] sucking the blood from the content of the Christian message.” “The most widespread culture,” he continued, “is dominated and impregnated by systemic doubt and a suspicion of everything that refers to faith, reason, religion, and natural law.”

In this situation, Cardinal Piacenza continued, the priest must be “a model of stability and maturity,” fully human but unwilling to “yield to the conformisms and compromises of society,” resisting “all the assaults that political, economic, and cultural powers can unleash against [the Church].”

In June of this year, Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles brought a similar message to seminarians. At St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia, he challenged seminarians to understand “the new realities that the Church confronts in our culture” in order to “counteract our American culture.”
and to transform it. In a recent article in *The Tidings* (newspaper of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles), Archbishop Gomez went into detail about what needs changing in our culture: “Secularism and moral relativism. A highly secularized and materialistic outlook. Radical individualism. Crises in marriage and fatherhood and personal commitment. Religious indifferentism and the ‘eclipse of God.’” Therefore, he wrote, “we need to prepare priests who can *counteract* our American culture—by their preaching, by their pastoral care, by their style of life. We need to form priests who can purify and sanctify our culture with the values and vision of the Gospel. The world will be converted—not by words and programs—but by witness.”

And just a few weeks ago, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Vatican’s permanent observer at the United Nations offices in Geneva, spoke to the annual Rimini meeting organized by Communion and Liberation. He warned the participants that Christianity is under ideological attack in many parts of the world, saying: “Certain forms of ideology are preventing the free exercise of religion on the part of Christians, Catholics in particular.” These attacks are often subtle, he continued, “like the attempt to eliminate the influence of persons with religious convictions from contributing to the common good by participating in public life.”

**GROWING CONFRONTATION**

For a while after the Second Vatican Council, Church leaders seemed to embrace a more welcoming approach to culture, in accord with the attitude of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes* (GS, 1965): “Nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in [the hearts of Christ’s followers].” In this document, the bishops in council described themselves and the Church itself as in “solidarity with . . . the entire human family,” willing to engage with humanity “in conversation” about the various problems in “the current trend of the world, about the place and role of man in the universe, about the meaning of its individual and collective strivings, and about the ultimate destiny of reality and of humanity” (GS, 3).

Gradually, though, beginning in the 1980s, that attitude of solidarity and the approach of engaged conversation were replaced by a growing distrust and a more confrontational approach. That distrust was expressed in major documents such as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s declaration *Dominus Iesus* (DI, 2000), which stated that the “Church’s constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure* (or in principle).” These theories, the document said, are rooted in “certain presuppositions of both a philosophical and theological nature, which hinder the understanding and acceptance of the revealed truth. Some of these can be mentioned: the conviction of the elusiveness and inexpressibility of divine truth, even by Christian revelation; relativistic attitudes toward truth itself, according to which what is true for some would not be true for others; the radical opposition posited between the logical mentality of the West and the symbolic mentality of the East; the
subjectivism which, by regarding reason as the only source of knowledge, becomes incapable of raising its ‘gaze to the heights, not daring to rise to the truth of being’ . . . (DI, 4). Pope Benedict XVI has frequently called attention to what he calls “radical secularism” in politics and culture, which he sees as a major cause in the decline of religious liberty and of the role of religious thought in politics and culture.

Addressing bishops of the United States during an ad limina visit on January 19, 2012, Pope Benedict described what he believes is “at the heart of every culture, whether perceived or not”—“a consensus about the nature of reality and the moral good, and thus about the conditions for human flourishing. In America, that consensus, as enshrined in your nation’s founding documents, was grounded in a worldview shaped not only by faith but a commitment to certain ethical principles deriving from nature and nature’s God.” However, he continued, things have changed: “Today that consensus has eroded significantly in the face of powerful new cultural currents which are not only directly opposed to core moral teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but increasingly hostile to Christianity as such.” Addressing participants in a plenary meeting of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at about the same time, Pope Benedict pointed out that “in vast areas of the earth faith risks being extinguished, like a flame that is no longer fed. We are facing a profound crisis of faith, a loss of the religious sense that constitutes the greatest challenge to the Church today. The renewal of faith must therefore take priority in the commitment of the entire Church in our time.” Even in the field of ecumenical conversation and cooperation, he felt the presence of an “indifferentism . . . . caused by the increasingly widespread opinion that truth is not accessible to man; hence it is necessary to limit oneself to finding rules for a praxis that can better the world. And like this, faith becomes substituted by a moralism without deep foundations.”

Pope Benedict clearly feels that the Church and its teachings are under attack. Culture is no longer a dialogue partner; it is the enemy of Christian truth—a truth, he told the American bishops, that is itself the last defense of human personhood and society. He explained to
the bishops: “To the extent that some current cultural trends contain elements that would curtail the proclamation of these truths, whether constricting it within the limits of a merely scientific rationality, or suppressing it in the name of political power or majority rule, they represent a threat not just to Christian faith but also to humanity itself and to the deepest truth about our being and ultimate vocation, our relationship to God. When a culture attempts to suppress the dimension of ultimate mystery, and to close the doors to transcendent truth, it inevitably becomes impoverished and falls prey, as the late Pope John Paul II so clearly saw, to reductionist and totalitarian readings of the human person and the nature of society.”

A MIDDLE GROUND

With such a negative reading of current cultural trends, it’s no wonder that attempts at dialogue have fizzled and that priests are encouraged to be countercultural. Yet there’s that dramatic challenge at the beginning of Gaudium et spes: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the [people] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.” Without dialogue, without engaging the people of this age to discern their joys, hopes, griefs, and anxieties, how will we discover the “genuinely human” in our culture? If we stand at a distance, without engagement, how will we learn to speak within the culture in order to lead people toward transformation?

Instead of giving up and retreating behind walls, don’t we need to make a greater effort to engage with people in the quest for truth? In the declaration Dignitatis humanae (1965), the bishops called the Church to engage in the quest for truth “in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth.” Priests, in particular, are called to engage in this shared quest, as the conciliar decree Pres-
byterorum ordinis makes clear: Priests, it says, “cannot be ministers of Christ unless they be witnesses and dispensers of a life other than earthly life. But they cannot be of service to [others] if they remain strangers to the life and conditions of [human beings]. Their ministry itself, by a special title, forbids that they be conformed to this world; yet at the same time it requires that they live in this world among men. . . . To achieve this aim, certain virtues, which in human affairs are deservedly esteemed, contribute a great deal: such as goodness of heart, sincerity, strength and constancy of mind, zealous pursuit of justice, affability, and others. The Apostle Paul commends them saying: ‘Whatever things are true, whatever honorable, whatever just, whatever holy, whatever loving, whatever of good repute, if there be any virtue, if anything is worthy of praise, think upon these things’ (Phil 4:8).”

Our liturgy continues to call us to imitate Saint Paul, looking for what is true, honorable, just, holy, loving, and virtuous in our culture; pointing out those aspects that are worthy of thought and imitation as well as those that detract from the fullness of human existence; embracing the good and engaging in dialogue to correct what is wrong. We offer Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation that remind us that we worship a God rich in mercy, who constantly offers pardon and calls on sinners to trust in divine forgiveness, who never turned away from us (see Preface, Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation I). By the Spirit, God moves human hearts so “that enemies may speak to each other again, adversaries join hands, and peoples seek to meet together” (Preface, Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation II). The several Eucharistic Prayers for Various Needs describe the Church as “a prophetic sign of unity and concord,” worshiping a God “who always walk[s] with us on the journey of life” as we respond to “the needs of our brothers and sisters” as living witnesses “to truth and freedom, to peace and justice, that all people may be raised up to a new hope.”

But if we retreat any further behind walls, cutting ourselves off from the culture and its quest for truth, justice, love, and peace—even if that culture seems to disparage and denigrate what we have to offer—then our voice of praise for what is good and well as of complaint against what is wrong will be smothered by our walls and will grow fainter and fainter, ever less effective in promoting the change that we seek.

**REVIEWING THE SITUATION**

During the recent NPM Annual Convention, members of the Clergy Section Steering Committee met with clergy members to review the work of the Section. They proposed several changes to the layout and frequency of *NPM Clergy Update*, and the National Staff is reviewing those proposals to determine what’s possible. Stay tuned for further developments.