Chapter 8

Handing on the Faith to the “New Athenians” in the American Catholic Church

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"Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.”

(Acts 17:22)

1

On June 18, 2004, near the end of a weeklong special assembly in Colorado, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) released “Catholics in Political Life.”1 This 970-word statement, prompted by the controversy over the reception of the Eucharist by Catholic politicians who publicly support abortion legislation, received significant media attention for its position, based upon canon law and pastoral discernment, that each diocesan bishop retained the right to deny or to offer the Eucharist to such politicians.

The statement’s terseness — even blandness — was complemented by the release, on June 23, of the more expansive interim reports of the USCCB’s Task Force on Catholic Bishops and Catholic Politicians. These three reports, presented to the bishops on June 15 as guides for their discussion, addressed the theological and pastoral concerns underlying the public controversy.2 Archbishop William Levada of San Francisco, in his theological reflection, noted that, despite more than three decades of consistent Catholic teaching on abortion in the aftermath of Roe v. Wade, the dialogue between the Catholic bishops and both Catholic politicians and American culture at large still seemed not to have been “effectively engaged.” Ignorance abounds, particularly among Catholic politicians on the relationship of their faith and their public service. The archbishop thus encouraged the bishops to recognize that, as “naive” as it might seem, the dialogue is still at a “beginning stage.” He added, in a subsequent interview, that “we bishops have a lot to learn about the practicalities and the steps involved in political judgments, including political platforms and party relationships. We have to envision a dialogue that is not just one way.”3

Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, D.C., speaking on behalf of the Task Force, noted that the committee had its origins in the bishops’ “common frustration and deep disappointment” at Catholic political leaders whose voting “ignore[s] or contradict[s]” church teaching. The bishops could not shirk their responsibilities as teachers, pastors, and leaders. As teachers, they faced the challenge of a comprehensive “evangelization and catechesis” on human life and dignity, ranging from schools and parishes to adult faith-formation and RCIA programs. The cardinal also spelled out the shape of persuasion more explicitly than did the USCCB’s statement: “Relationships matter. We cannot communicate and persuade simply through newspaper columns or issuing statements. We need to dedicate ourselves to dialogue with those in public life, especially those who do not follow the Church’s teaching.” For these reasons and others, the Task Force did not generally recommend the denial of communion to Catholic politicians or Catholic voters whose stands on life issues contradicted the church’s. Such measures are permitted, said McCarrick, but they “should be applied only when efforts at dialogue, persuasion, and conversion have been fully exhausted.”

Unmentioned by both the brief “Catholics in Political Life” and the lengthier interim reports, however, was a sobering fact: more than thirty years after Roe v. Wade and the bishops’ subsequent efforts against legalized abortion, American Catholics are indistinguishable from other Americans in their acceptance (and practice) of abortion. A May 2004 CBS News poll, for instance, reported that 73 percent of all Americans and 71 percent of American Catholics support some form of legalized abortion.4 Even taking into account such variables as commitment, ethnicity, and Mass attendance, these statistics are depressing. How does this rupture between efforts and results affect the way that the Catholic Church hands on its faith now and in coming years?5
The fundamental issue is not primarily the content or the frequency of Catholic teaching on abortion, but rather its effectiveness. Clear, steadfast teaching is necessary, but not sufficient to repair the breach between the church’s faith and its members’ practice. The problem is deeper: it is cultural, symbolic, mythic, imaginative, and, ultimately, spiritual. To put it bluntly, very few advocates of abortion rights want to be complicit in scraping an embryo out of a uterus or stabbing a partially delivered fetus’s head with a pair of surgical scissors. They instead support—or tolerate—abortion because of a seeming lack of plausible alternatives, a desire to pursue other goods that might be jeopardized by the birth of a child, or an inability to grasp the gift-character of each human life. Consider, for example, the recent name-change of America’s foremost abortion-rights organization from the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) to NARAL Pro-Choice America; its Web site address is even simpler: www.prochoiceamerica.org. NARAL Pro-Choice America’s literature and lobbying speak more of “choice” and “reproductive freedom” than of “abortion.” NARAL knows its audience and its culture, and so shapes its message to tap into the foundational American mythos of freedom. Details of embryology and abortion procedures are rarely—if ever—mentioned.

The church’s efforts to transform Catholic and American cultural and religious life, then, will bear fruit only to the extent that they engage such culture by offering a spiritual vision that is capable of affirming its authentic desires and challenging its distorted ones. Sixty years ago, in an article calling for a renewed theological formation for the laity, John Courtney Murray put it thusly:

[I]t is important to realize, first of all, that secularism and indifferentism are not just religious errors, but religious diseases, which have to be healed at a level deeper than that of reason. Though they have their “philosophies,” they are not intellectual aberrations; their origins are not so much in reason, as in myth—the myth of the self-sufficient man in the naturalist closed universe—which then seeks to rationalize itself.

Hence the appeal to reason and apologetic argument against them is of very limited efficacy; it may demolish the rationalization, but it leaves the myth untouched. Their appeal is that of a spirit, a total and generalized way of life, an all pervasive mode of thought, affection, sentiment, action. And this appeal can only be met successfully by the creation of a counter-spirit, generated by a vision of the whole Christian truth about God, man, and the world, which in turn generates a victorious sense of the uniquely salvific value of faith. Only this vision and this inner experience can fortify the spirit against infection from our secularist environment. What it needs is solid nourishment, and exercise in the full-orbed sun of Christ, the Light of the World; medicine, minor surgery, isolation, and the careful application of little apologetic “band-aids” here and there will not suffice....

In this situation our tactics should be clear. To a radical and total challenge, one must fling a radical and total answer.6

Besides offering proof that there was never a golden age of moral uprightness—even for the so-called “Greatest Generation”—Murray’s words remind us today that the controversy over abortion is representative of a broader concern for the education and formation of the Catholic community. The challenge of traditio is precisely a spiritual one, as Murray realized, and so the church’s response must be equally spiritual. It must foster a spirituality of communication that can transform in Christ the reigning symbols and myths of our times.

We propose, in this paper, some signposts and suggestions for such a spirituality of communication. As we have no expertise in catechetics or communications theory, our focus will be on the theological roots of communication. We will first analyze briefly belief and unbelief in our contemporary Western culture. Second, the pivot of our argument will be an interpretation of the Apostle Paul’s encounter with the Athenians, as presented in Acts 17. Paul’s approach offers an enduring model for how to transform culture and form disciples of the Risen One. The writings of the Anglican bishop-exegete N. T. Wright and the Irish Jesuit Michael Paul Gallagher on this passage provide complementary insights into how to engage what we call the “New Athenians,” those contemporary Catholics who fill our churches and marketplaces. Next, we propose two virtues—humility and courage—as the foundational dispositions that should guide such cultural discernment. And, last, we suggest some practices and disciplines that seem necessary today for communicating and handing on the faith: contemplation and dialogue.
II

In his 1975 apostolic exhortation, Evangelii nuntiandi, Pope Paul VI wrote some of his most enduring words: “The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly of cultures.”7 Such evangelization of cultures, he stated, must be done “not in a purely decorative way as it were by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots.”8 Recognizing this interplay of Gospel and culture is essential for any communication of the church’s faith. Belief and unbelief do not develop in a cultural vacuum, and so discernment of culture is central to any attempt to hand on the faith.

In Clashing Symbols, Michael Paul Gallagher sees contemporary unbelief among Christians arising more from apathy than from the anger or the alienation more prevalent in decades past. Such unbelief flows from a lack of exposure to Christianity and is more a cultural by-product than something chosen: “This is no longer [Henri] de Lubac’s ‘drama of atheistic humanism’ but rather an undramatic limbo of non-belonging.”9 Gallagher describes four main forms of cultural unbelief that affect believers and nonbelievers alike; no one is immune to their influence.10 The first type is “religious anemia,” characterized by a distance from Christian roots in which the church’s language of faith is experienced as a “foreign tongue.” This credibility gap is caused largely by a lack of “pastoral imagination,” in which the church fails to enter into the cultural world of its intended hearers. It offers answers to unasked questions and fails to ask the right questions.11

The second type of unbelief is “secular marginalization.” Faith is essentially private, unworthy of serious intellectual attention. It is banished from the public square and made to seem implausible, irrelevant, even dangerous. We call this the “New York Times phenomenon,” in which columnists like Maureen Dowd and Thomas Friedman use words like “theology” and “dogma” as synonyms for blind adherence, fanatical attachment, and ignorance of reality.

“Anchorless spirituality,” Gallagher’s third type, can result from the excesses of the first two types. Lacking a meaningful language of faith (religious anemia) and bored by an unsatisfying materialism that privatizes faith (secular marginalization), persons and communities become susceptible to fads and even recurring heresies such as Gnosticism and pantheism. The spiritual hunger of these seekers is good, he notes, but their rootless drifting is dangerous and can lead to extremes of narcissism and fundamentalism.

Gallagher is most concerned, however, with a fourth kind of unbelief that he calls “cultural desolation.” Here, cultural pressures—often unrecognized—stifle and even “kidnap” the imagination, thereby rendering people “unfree for Revelation—or more precisely, for the hearing from which faith comes (cf. Romans 10:17).” Unbelief of this sort affects one’s very readiness or disposition towards faith. He quotes from Cardinal Newman’s Grammar of Assent that “the heart is commonly reached not through the reason, but through the imagination.” Imagination must therefore be the primary faculty to which communication of the faith must appeal, first by “clearing the ground” of the dehumanizing aspects of culture and then by “liberating levels of hearing and desire.” The movement here is, as Gallagher puts it, from the “dia-bolic” to the “symbolic,” from division to synthesis, from blockage to flow. The means by which one moves from unbelief to belief is our next topic.

III

Acts 17:16–34 is perhaps the classic scriptural account of the encounter between Christianity and culture. Its outlines are familiar: Paul arrives in Athens, the apotheosis of culture and wisdom, and is disgusted by its idolatry. After some debate with Jews in their synagogue and with Greek philosophers in the marketplace, he is led to the Areopagus to explain his teaching on the Resurrection. There, he begins by noting the Athenians’ deep religiosity displayed in their many altars and temples. Alluding to Stoicism and quoting Greek poets and philosophers, he tells them that the “unknown god” worshiped at one of their altars is the God who created the world and all of its inhabitants. This same God, who transcends his creation, calls all to repentance and to faith in the Resurrection of his “appointed” one from the dead. At this point, some of his hearers scoff at this teaching, others are intrigued, and still others believe. Paul has taken the heart of the Christian faith into the heart of worldly wisdom, and the Resurrection is both stumbling block and synthesis to the cultured Athenians.
N. T. Wright and Michael Paul Gallagher offer complementary analyses of Paul’s evangelization. If Wright focuses more on the Athenians’ transformation, while Gallagher concentrates on Paul’s own transformation as a preacher, both nonetheless see Acts 17 as offering an enduring approach to communicating the faith. Wright proposes that Paul’s preaching follows a threefold method of affirmation, confrontation, and outflanking or transforming exposition. Paul begins his Areopagus speech by affirming all that is good or potentially good in Athenian culture: their religious devotion, however misguided, to the Unknown God; their philosophical and poetic heritage; their belief in a Creator. However, Paul also confronts the Athenians’ “rank idolatry”: “[w]ith the Parthenon and the other wonderful temples in view, he declare[s] that man-made temples [a]re a waste of time” (e.g., Acts 17:24–25, 29–30). Affirmation and confrontation culminate in Paul’s attempt to transform culture and communicate his faith through “outflanking exposition.” Wright says that Paul deploys a thoroughly Jewish understanding of God as Creator to transform Greek thought; by presenting God as the Creator who both dwells in, and yet is distinct from and sovereign over, his creation, Paul outflanks the distant God of Epicureanism and the pantheism of Stoicism (has contemporary idolatry changed much from its ancient forms?!). Paul thus enters into the Athenian world in order to entirely transform it from within. He shows the Athenians that their noblest ideals find fulfillment only in Christ and that they should not settle for the “second-best” of worldly, Greek thought.

Like Wright, Gallagher finds in Acts 17 a threefold approach to communicating faith and transforming culture. He focuses, though, on the transformation of the communicator. His lens is the Ignatian framework of the discernment of spirits, of the interplay between consolation and desolation. Gallagher, unlike Wright, begins by recounting Paul’s disgust upon entering Athens. Seeing idolatry all around him, he argues with Jew and Greek alike, and is dismissed as a “babbler” and a “proclaimer of false divinities” (Acts 17:18).

Unaccountably, though, Paul’s approach changes when he enters the Areopagus. Instead of immediate confrontation, he begins — as we know — by mentioning the Athenians’ evident religiosity and putting aside explicit judgment upon it. His teaching affirms the good in their culture and appeals to their desire for experience of God. Although Paul is not afraid to call the Athenians to repentance, his preaching succeeds because it enters into the culture and so can awaken its deepest desires. As Gallagher writes, Paul “identif[ied] seeds of the gospel within pagan religiousness…. Behind the frivolous appearances lay deeper spiritual hungers. Behind the games of argumentativeness lay a poetry and a spirituality that he began to appreciate in a new way.”

Gallagher is intrigued by Paul’s change in tactics as he moves from the Agora to the Areopagus: how can one account for such a dramatic transformation? Gallagher suggests that Paul moves from a state of desolation to one of consolation. Such consolation — a state of “being-in-tune-with Christ,” a “sense of expanding in harmony with what is deepest in us, the Spirit in us” — liberates Paul to embrace whatever good can be found in Athenian culture. Trusting that God is not absent even from idolatry, Paul can now discern the seeds of God’s presence and activity in what is opposed to God. Where desolation is like “closed fists, ready to reject,” consolation is like “open hands, ready to receive.”

Such consolation enables one to discern honestly and fruitfully one’s cultural situation. It enables one to leave behind the tense, adversarial hostility that can see only what is evil, because it “see[s] desolation only with desolation.” One thinks, for instance, of what we call the “ism” criticism,” that intellectual and spiritual laziness that avoids the hard work of discernment through the construction and demolition of such easy targets as, say, “secularism,” “relativism,” or “materialism.” Conversely, the experience of consolation can also prevent one from settling for an unquestioning, promiscuous, or even resigned acceptance of culture. A basic disposition of consolation does not exclude denunciation, then, but rather keeps one from “rejecting entire ways of life as utterly beyond the reach of the gospel.”

Moreover, although Acts 17 involves an encounter of Christianity with a non-Christian culture, it can also apply today to handing on the faith in a Christian context. In this sense, the dividing line runs not simply through Christian and non-Christian, but through the heart of each Christian believer and each Christian culture — devout, indifferent, moribund, antagonistic, or some mixture thereof. How do we communicate with the “New Athenians” in our churches, our families, and our own hearts? How do we relate to their culture, their education, their achievements, their belief and unbelief? How do we find the dispositions and practices that can help transform them — mindful, of course, that our success, like Paul’s, may be modest at first. For that matter,
how do we foster in our communicators that same transformation from desolation to consolation undergone by Paul?

Gallagher argues that the church must cultivate a sense of "cultural agency" in both its communicators and its hearers if faith is to be communicated and culture transformed. It must not be passive, but rather a "producer of meaning" both intellectual and spiritual. The church does so when it first interprets and judges its cultural situation and second fosters alternative communities and spiritualities. Transformation is possible only when a positive vision is proposed and embodied.

The church's stance on abortion is an obvious example of the deep need for such agency. Following Wright and Gallagher, the first step in such agency would be to affirm the value of freedom and of choice. In a world in which many struggle to be free, while a relative few have the opportunity to shape deliberately the course of their lives, the rhetoric of freedom is powerful and attractive. In particular, women, long subject to various forms of domination, have a rightful desire to be in possession of their bodies and lives and thereby exercise a legitimate autonomy. The church must listen to women and their experiences of oppression and of liberation. If women (and men) believe that they are not being listened to, that their interlocutor is merely waiting to speak, then church teaching will get nowhere. Relationships matter, as Cardinal McCarrick said, and true relationships are always mutual ones. These relationships, like any others, will need time to build trust.

The next step, though, must be confrontation and challenge. This can be scientific, philosophical, even autobiographical. Embryological data can be astonishing; we, for instance, were amazed during Deborah's first pregnancy when we read of the fetus's development: the liver and kidneys begin to form within a week of conception, the heart begins to beat after three weeks, brain waves can be detected at six weeks. Such easily available knowledge can counteract the tendency to depersonalize the embryo and reduce it to an abstraction. Communicators should speak, too, of the logic of freedom: What is freedom for? What is the object of "freedom of choice"? Does such license liberate and empower women and men? Here, sensitive, nonmanipulative accounts of suffering, depression, and guilt from women and men who have experienced abortion can help tie together scientific and philosophical insights through the autobiographical witness so valued in our culture. Ultimately, such challenges must expose the Orwellian language and thought that mask the violence of abortion.

The final step will be that of consolation and outflanking. Intellectually, communicators need to propose a truer sense of Christian freedom, its essential bonds to truth and love; they should show that contemporary understandings of freedom as autonomy and self-expression are incomplete, "second-best" notions that find their fulfillment only in relationship to Christ. Such teaching will be effective, though, only to the extent that it becomes visible and attractive in communities that give flesh to the Gospel of life. Gallagher, in particular, argues that such alternative communities are the only effective means of resistance and formation in cultures that are indifferent or hostile to the Christian values of self-transcendence and self-giving in community. These new communities — informal or formal, small or large — will give a witness of true freedom, generosity, hospitality, and a "contemplative outlook" able to perceive all life as a gift. Their consoling "open hands" will succeed far more than desolate "closed fists."

In this context, if Wright and Gallagher differ somewhat in emphasis — the former's evangelicalism may lead him to emphasize confrontation and discontinuity more than does the latter, who has a greater sense of Catholic continuity — both would agree, we think, with Pope John Paul II, who said in a 1995 homily in Baltimore that "[s]ometimes, witnessing to Christ will mean drawing out of a culture the full meaning of its noblest intentions, a fullness that is revealed in Christ. At other times, witnessing to Christ means challenging that culture, especially when the truth about the human person is under assault." We turn now to the virtues that shape such effective communication of Christ.

**IV**

Communication — from affirmation through confrontation to transformation — depends in great measure upon the character of the communicator and the manner of his or her communication. The virtues of humility and courage seem to be particularly appropriate ones for handing on the faith in our time and place, marked as they are by the sexual-abuse crisis, religious indifference, and national political controversy. Our comments here are more suggestive than exhaustive.
Humility, a distinctively Christian attribute, is our starting point, and St. Augustine, the doctor humilitatis, is our guide. Augustine maintained that humility, above all other virtues, characterizes the way that God communicates with us. The humility of God is revealed in the Incarnation. God does not cling to what is properly God's own (power, splendor, majesty), but chooses to be poured out into the human: "Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at . . ." (Phil 2:6).

God's humble approach in Christ seeks us out and meets us "where we are at." Through likeness to us, God in Christ communicates in a new way, establishing a new bond, a new meeting place, between God and humanity. By making our trials his own, Christ becomes himself the "common ground" between the divine and human. He mediates and overcomes the chasm of sin that separates God and humanity. His likeness to us opens up a new way for our return to God: "He applied to us the similarity of his humanity to take away the dissimilarity of our iniquity, and becoming a partaker of our mortality he made us partakers of his divinity."21

Christ's humility not only draws us in through kinship, but it also disarms us through contrast and even confrontation. By not "grasping" at the loftiness of his divinity and, instead, reaching out to us in our depraved condition, Christ reveals our own desperate clinging to the claims of the ego. God's extravagant, self-emptying love contrasts with our possessiveness and desire for control. The humbling of the Word simultaneously reveals the immense worth of humanity and exposes the desperate state of humanity steeped in prideful isolation and hostility. In brief, we find our redemption in both similarity and dissimilarity with the humble God.

The full measure of Christ's humility, however, is seen in his death on a cross. The humble Christ not only does not cling to divinity; he does not cling to a humanity of honor, comfort, or enjoyment. He freely and without calculation chooses through his suffering and death to make himself accountable for our sin. Augustine stresses that Christ's humility is God's initiative given in love and generosity for our sake.

Can the way that Christ extends himself to us in humility inspire us today in our struggles with communication? In the American church, the difficulty of good conversation among "liberals" and "conservatives" can reveal an unwillingness on all sides to reach beyond the confines of one's own framework and language. In speaking about the "cup of humility," Augustine writes:

It's easy enough to think about grandeur, easy enough to enjoy honors, easy enough to give our ears to yes-men and flatterers. To put up with abuse, to listen patiently to reproaches, to pray for the insolent, this is the Lord's cup, this is sharing the Lord's table.22

Is it not finally pride and despair, the illnesses cured by humility, which lead us to talk past one another and remain within our self-enclosed circle of conversation partners? We despair of thinking that we can learn from one another, that our time would be well spent trying to hammer out our differences. But how can we draw those on the margins closer to Christ, when those of us who are active in the church remain so divided and embittered? How do we come to terms with this failure to witness? Can Christ's humility inspire us to renounce pride, to take the first step, to listen, to acknowledge before our "opponent" that we don't know everything, that some of our judgments may have been hasty, and that perhaps there are facets of a given issue that we have not yet considered?23 What might humility look like in the context of a divided and polarized church?

The life of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago offers one witness. In his book, The Gift of Peace, he begins a chapter on being falsely accused of sexual abuse with a meditation appropriately entitled "Emptying Oneself." Faced with the accusation of sexual abuse by a former seminarian, he harbored feelings of anger and distrust towards many in the church and the media. In the midst of his humiliation, he "wondered if the voice of truth could be heard in a culture in which image making and distortion have almost completely replaced it."24 He added, "I was being emptied of self in a way that I could never have anticipated."25 Through prayer and the support of many friends, however, he was led to pray for his accuser, Steven Cook. Intuiting that Steven was in great pain and being used by other adversaries in the ordeal, Bernardin wrote him a letter to ask if they could meet and pray together; Steven's lawyer kept the letter from him. Several months later, after the charges were dropped, Bernardin continued to seek Steven out, and, when a meeting was arranged, he writes, "I only prayed that he would receive me."26
Bernardin describes the meeting as one of the most powerful manifestations of "God’s love, forgiveness, and healing" that he ever experienced. He listened to Steven’s life-story, his sexual abuse by a priest "friend," his bitterness toward the church, his struggle with AIDS. The meeting was not without hard, necessary moments of confrontation. At one point, Bernardin looked directly at Steven, seated a few inches away from him and said, “You know that I never abused you.” “I know,” Steven answered. “Can you tell me that again?” Again, Bernardin looked directly into his eyes and said, “I have never abused you. You know that, don’t you?” “Yes,” Steven replied, and then offered a “simple, direct, deeply moving” apology. Their reconciling, grace-filled meeting concluded, to the surprise of everyone, with the celebration of Mass. “Never,” Bernardin writes, “in my entire priesthood have I witnessed a more profound reconciliation. . . . And I could not help but recall the work of the Good Shepherd: to seek and restore to the sheepfold the one that has been, only for a while, lost.”

Augustine and Cardinal Bernardin teach us that Christ’s humility introduces a new strategy for communication — at once mediating, challenging, and, ultimately, transforming. His humble, healing touch is gentle or bracing, depending on our various illnesses. The radically unexpected nature of the Word’s descent into the ordinary human experience of weakness and frailty allows for a new vision of God and of communication. The way that God saves us is inseparable from salvation itself. So, too, does the way that we communicate Christ to others reveal who Christ is.

Humility flows into courage, particularly the courage to speak and to do the truth in love at whatever price. One of the most visible icons of courage in the church was undoubtedly Pope John Paul II. Tirelessly preaching the Gospel throughout the world, in season and out of season, "be not afraid" was his unceasing refrain. Avery Dulles, for one, sees the pope’s “New Evangelization” as one of, if not the, keys to his ministry. In a lecture on courage delivered to the English and Welsh bishops in 2002 (as yet unpublished), Timothy Radcliffe, the former master general of the Dominicans, suggests that such evangelization is a threatened project in the Western world. The West, he notes, is at once blessed by a previously unimaginable level of security and yet perhaps the most fearful culture in the world. Such fear cripples people by inducing a sense of helplessness and defensiveness. Many in the church, he claims, are afflicted by a “dis-courage[ment]” that endangers the much-needed work of evangelization.

The good news of the Gospel, however, is that there is no need to fear anything or anyone. When angels appear in scripture, Radcliffe writes, their first words are invariably, “Do not be afraid.” Fear is the death of love, for it closes us up on ourselves and isolates us from others. Courage first consists, then, in helping us to face up to our fears and to confront our vulnerability. Often seen as the antithesis of courage, vulnerability is actually its presupposition: the one who has no fear cannot be courageous. Courage consists precisely in encountering one’s fear and overcoming it. The central symbol of Christianity, Radcliffe says, is the naked vulnerability of the Cross.

Liberated from fear and anxiety by courage, one is then “free to do what a right perception of the situation requires,” be it bold speech, great deeds, endurance in the face of suffering, or the ability to accept one’s own death. In each of these challenges, Radcliffe holds that the characteristic “flavor” of courage is generosity: a freedom from the fearful self in order to lose oneself in service to others. The courageous person is not an Olympian hero, standing apart from society, but the saint who gives himself or herself to others, even to the point of death. Where the ancient god was invulnerable, the Christian God is precisely the one who is vulnerable unto death. The generosity of courage encompasses a passion for communion (and communication) with God and with humanity.

The communicator must never be afraid to confront what is distorted or evil, then, but he or she must always do so from an awareness of one’s own weakness. The stridency that comes from invulnerability may appear courageous, even prophetic, but it often fails to transform others or even oneself. Radcliffe wonders whether the church’s prophetic stands sometimes fail to gain a hearing because of a perception that its leaders are often invulnerable, unable to show vulnerability within the church itself:

We do often dare to take unpopular positions on such topics as abortion, or peace, or for the poorest. We do often dare to risk ridicule and dismissal because of our convictions. We know that we are vulnerable and may be crucified by the press and be misunderstood by the young. Sometimes, and I am not altogether sure why, I have a sneaking feeling that our courageous stands do not
quite ring true, do not entirely convince. Why is this? I suspect that it is because we are not so courageous at facing our vulnerability within the Church. For [our] deepest vulnerability is to each other, and so it is here that our most profound courage is required. We are bound together within the Church by far deeper bonds of love and communion, and so it is here that we can be most hurt. It is here, with each other, that we can be most touched by the loss of face, by the destruction of reputation, by scorn or neglect. It is here where we must face the most painful forms of alienation, misrepresentation and mental exile. If we cannot be truly courageous ad intra, then maybe our brave stands ad extra will not entirely ring true.

Vulnerability is not the end of courage, but it is its beginning. Communicators in the church must keep this in mind, lest they fall into desolation when they survey an often depressing culture within the church and in the world. Courage will help them to endure so as not to let “adversity crush [their] joy.”

V

“Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” In writing these words, Paul VI knew that witness is the conditio sine qua non of Christian communication. And, at a time when the Catholic Church in the United States has lost many of its long-standing cultural supports (e.g., immigrant subcultures, parish-based social life, esteem in popular culture) and even much of its credibility, the witness of both communities and persons is often the only convincing means of handing on the faith. The sexual-abuse crisis and its aftermath give obvious, tragic evidence of the harm caused by corrupted witness. In this concluding section, then, we propose two dimensions of Christian witness that seem particularly apt modes of Christian communication in today’s cultural context: a “contemplative outlook” and dialogue.

Christian communication finds its deepest wellspring in prayer, communication with God; one cannot give what one does not have. Karl Rahner famously said that the Christian of tomorrow will be a mystic, or he [or she] will not be at all. Even granting its rhetorical bluntness, his comment seems even more prescient today. In Western cultures, Christianity can no longer rely upon the broad cultural matrix that helped to sustain belief and practice. Formation by osmosis is no longer possible, and so religious identity must now be more intentionally chosen and intentionally formed:

[It would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which today’s world subjects faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but “Christians at risk.” They would run the insidious risk of seeing their faith progressively undermined, and would perhaps end up succumbing to the allure of “substitutes,” accepting alternative religious proposals and even indulging in far-fetched superstitions.]

An autobiographical note may be helpful here. As believers and as theologians, we know how we — who have the luxury of work that allows time for reflection — both crave silence and yet flee from it; we live, for example, three blocks away from a church that has perpetual adoration, and collectively we have been there three times in two months. And, with two young children of our own, we also know how parents — worn out from work and childrearing — struggle with the temptation to have their children watch television and “educational” videos.

Moreover, as teachers, we find ourselves astonished and often frustrated by the sheer noise and activity of our students. Twenty-year-olds have rarely been temperamentally Carthusian, but we notice a change from even fifteen years ago (when we were about twenty and, of course, meditative and ascetic). Cell phones, DVDs, Wi-Fi, Instant-Messaging, PowerPoint, Friendster, student lounges filled with televisions: none of these existed in 1990. More important, most of our students have scarcely a still moment in their day; they often work twenty to forty hours a week to pay for school and for luxuries, take a full load of classes, and participate in extracurriculars and resumé-building. In these circumstances, how can evangelization and catechesis break through this “wall of sound and image,” to paraphrase the music producer Phil Spector? How can we compete with the immediacy, omnipresence, and superior professionalism of mass media, particularly advertising and music videos? How can the Word of God be heard?
Simply put, the church cannot compete with such forces and will waste precious time and resources in trying to do so. Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures." We think she was wrong: to the deaf, one shows a picture; to the blind, one speaks. Likewise, to those bombarded by sound and image, one should offer silence. A contemplative outlook is thus perhaps the best way forward. Such an outlook comprises both a worldview and a set of practices or disciplines. The shape of this worldview is sketched in the fourth, final chapter ("You Did It to Me: For a New Culture of Human Life") of Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical, Evangelium vitae:

Because we have been sent into the world as a "people for life," our proclamation must also become a genuine celebration of the Gospel of life. This celebration, with the evocative power of its gestures, symbols and rites, should become a precious and significant setting in which the beauty and grandeur of this Gospel is handed on.

For this to happen, we need first of all to foster, in ourselves and in others, a contemplative outlook. Such an outlook arises from faith in the God of life, who has created every individual as a "wonder" (cf. Ps 139:14). It is the outlook of those who see life in its deeper meaning, who grasp its utter gratuitousness, its beauty and its invitation to freedom and responsibility. It is the outlook of those who do not presume to take possession of reality but instead accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person his living image (cf. Gen 1:27; Ps 8:5). This outlook does not give in to discouragement when confronted by those who are sick, suffering, outcast or at death's door. Instead, in all these situations it feels challenged to find meaning, and precisely in these circumstances it is open to perceiving in the face of every person a call to encounter, dialogue and solidarity (italics in original).34

Gratitude, beauty, wonder, communion, solidarity, and celebration are the dominant optics in this vision.35 They can be cultivated, though, only through deliberate practices, especially those that embrace silence. A paradox emerges: the most needed dimension of a spirituality of communication is perhaps silence. Spouses and families need to be shown how to pray together, to listen to God together; the Ignatian examen, for one, can be easily adapted for familial use. Believers need to find in their liturgies a sense of reverence and stillness, instead of extremes of stimulation and drabness. Students and parishioners need formation in the spiritualities that have flourished through the centuries; the monastic practice of lectio divina is well-suited for the classroom and the prayer group. For all believers and potential believers, such disciplines of silent attentiveness can be profoundly transformative, giving them the sustenance and the space that their homes and workplaces and cultures cannot.

Furthermore, as the battle over abortion (as with other life issues such as capital punishment, reproductive technologies, and cloning) is ultimately one of imagination and heart, a contemplative outlook seems necessary if the church is to transform both itself as well as the broader culture. Only in such a worldview can human life be seen as a gift rather than as (tragically) expendable or manipulable. A people skilled in silence and attentiveness can grasp that, in the words of the poet e e cummings, "A world of made is not a world of born."36

A spirituality of communication entails not only silence but speech. In a letter to the American bishops written just before his death in August 2003, the late Msgr. Philip Murnion asked, "Does not the living out of such a spirituality of communion require dialogue as its very life-breath: the dialogue of prayer with Jesus Christ, the dialogue of mutual building up on the part of the members of Christ?"37 Such dialogue is thus primarily not a matter of proper technique or courtesy, but a way of life, a personal encounter that demands conversion of its participants. Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical on ecumenism, Ut unum sint, provides a suggestive account of dialogue, which, although pertaining directly to ecumenism, applies equally to other forms of Christian dialogue and communication. The pope notes, first of all, that dialogue engages the entire person — spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, imaginatively. This personalist vision of dialogue must not be reduced to "simply an exchange of ideas," but is an "exchange of gifts."38 It recognizes the other party as a "partner" and begins with the presumption that "each side must presuppose in the other a desire for reconciliation, for unity in the truth" (Utus, #29). Genuine dialogue also calls for prayer and a searching examination of conscience. Each partner needs to acknowledge his or her own sinfulness before the other and before God. "Vertical" reconciliation with God, in fact, gives rise to "horizontal" communion: it "creates in brothers and sisters living in Communities
not in full communion with one another that interior space where Christ, the source of the Church's unity, can effectively act, with all the power of his Spirit, the Paraclete” (UUS, #34–35).

Most promising, though, for our topic of communication is the pope's reminder that differences in theological and dogmatic language do not necessarily indicate differences in belief. Under the appearance of outright contradiction, agreement — even substantial — may exist. It may be the case, he writes, that parties use the same words to describe different realities, or different words to describe the same reality; the pope alludes to the christological agreements of recent decades with the Assyrian and the Ancient Churches of the East that have overcome centuries of bitter theological and ecclesial estrangement. We need, it seems, to be creative with our words and humble enough not to cling to our own formulations — valid as they may be — if they distract or mislead those we seek to engage. Sometimes this may mean not inventing new words, but reappropriating older ones.

We find this distinction (not separation) between reality and language helpful in engaging our students, friends, and families in dialogue. They are often inarticulate about their deepest beliefs, and so often fall back on clichés: “It's true for me,” “All religions have the same basic message,” “I can't impose my beliefs on someone else.” Many — probably most — of them profess some form of relativism, be it religious, epistemological, moral, or cultural. At this point during conversation, we usually have to fight the urge to throw up our hands in frustration or to mutter snide dismissals.

However, if we patiently ask them whether rape is always wrong, for instance, the limits of their relativism quickly become clear. They do, in fact, have strong, even absolute convictions, but are hamstrung by the language of relativism that surrounds them. We can then help them develop a more thoughtful, accurate language. But, we can also gain a renewed respect for how difficult faith is for so many — especially those who are earnestly if confusedly seeking transcendence and meaning; we can grow in humble gratitude for the gift of faith that has been given to us by God and the church through no merit of our own. Further dialogue can then help develop a trust and a language that find common ground in what might seem to be incommensurable positions. Such advances — however infrequent or meager — are no small achievements in a culture that, as the philosopher Charles Taylor has stressed, is frighteningly inarticulate about its beliefs and desires.

VI

There is little disagreement about the importance of handing on the Catholic faith to present and future generations. We are not sure, though, that the urgency of this task is sufficiently grasped. The religious and cultural capital built up over decades and centuries is rapidly dwindling in American Catholicism. If faith is not deliberately proposed and fostered, it will be washed away by a culture that has distorted and stifled the religious instinct inherent in every person. We sense that the “New Athenians” — apart from cultural and intellectual elites who seek liberation everywhere but in the Judeo-Christian tradition — are not so much hostile to religion, as they are suffering from a lack of vision, meaning, and challenge. Liberal Catholics have shown themselves unable to pass on their faith to younger generations in any sustainable, attractive, intellectually coherent manner; their intra-ecclesial battles are often of little interest to the young, who wonder why the church is even necessary at all. Conservative Catholics settle for moralism, fearful cultural denunciation, and the Catechism, and so fail to appeal to the imaginations or hearts of the young. The “New Athenians” in our church and world need and deserve more than they are presently getting from a polarized leadership class. Handing on the faith to them will succeed only if the church has the imagination to affirm their spiritual longings, confront their contemporary idols, and transform both in a renewed preaching, celebration, and service of Christ.

When the vision of God's being and doing has become weak, theology becomes defensive — and so do Christians in general and priests in particular. . . . But somehow or other, we all have to undergo a fairly fundamental conversion from seeing revealed truth as a possession to be guarded to seeing it as a place to inhabit; not one bit of territory that needs protection, but the whole world renewed. We shall not proclaim Christ effectively if we are constantly reverting to what makes us anxious rather than what makes us grateful.