

Awakenings: Living as a Believer in the Nation We Have Now

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My dear friends, I am here today because I believe the friendship of the Latter-day Saint and Catholic communities is important. The better we know each other's stories as religious minorities in this country, the better we can support each other in pursuing some of the vital issues we share. And that serves not just our beliefs and concerns but the health of our entire nation.

I want to begin by giving you some background on the Catholic experience in this country. I will do that through the lens of a particular Catholic bishop—me. I don't claim to speak for all or even most Americans who describe themselves as Catholic, but my comments do reflect the views of many Catholics who rank their Catholic faith as the most precious thing in their lives—and actually live that way.

Our Task as Believers in America

Let me start with a simple fact: Catholics have never entirely "fit" in America. We have tried, but the results are mixed. In fact, some years ago Stanley Hauerwas, the distinguished Protestant theologian, said that not only do we Catholics not fit in America, but we also *know* we don't fit in. And because we know, we are doubly eager to prove that we are more American than anybody else.

For Hauerwas, the proof is obvious. He wrote:

All you need to know . . . is that the FBI is made up of Catholics and Southerners. This is because Catholics and Southerners [need] to show they are more loyal than most Americans, since Southerners have a history of disloyalty and Americans fear that Catholics may owe their allegiance to some guy in Rome. That is why the FBI is given the task of examining graduates of Harvard and Yale—that is, high-culture Protestants who, of course, no longer believe in God—to see if they are loyal enough to be operatives for the CIA.¹

Hauerwas was writing with a dry sense of humor, but what he said is largely true. America's roots are deeply Protestant and Americans are historically suspicious of Catholics. America is a child of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Neither event had much use for the Catholic Church. At the time of the revolution, out of three million or more colonists, fewer than 25,000 were Catholics. In practice, Catholics were

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often tolerated because their numbers were so small. And some, like Charles Carroll, the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence, were well educated and quite successful. But prejudice against Catholics was nonetheless widespread.

The really ugly anti-Catholic bigotry—church burnings and looted convents—came later, in the nineteenth century, and it was linked, predictably, to the waves of poor immigrants who arrived from Catholic countries in Europe and the social strains they caused. Reading the official documents of America’s Catholic bishops from the 1830s to the 1950s is revealing. They tell us two things: first, the bishops were determined to protect their people from public hatred and violence, and second, they were committed to proving their loyalty as good citizens integrated into the American mainstream. America’s Catholic bishops wanted their members to be more loyal than anyone else, so they became zealously patriotic.

I was born in 1944, and I inherited that spirit of patriotism. It shaped the early years of my own life and my generation. More than eighty Catholic chaplains died in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Five Catholic chaplains, all of them priests, won the Congressional Medal of Honor in those same wars. When I was growing up, the nation’s service academies all had a disproportionate number of Catholic cadets. And even today—after the disaffection of the Catholic Left during Vietnam and the Catholic critics of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, including at times the Vatican—most American Catholics have a deep habit of loyalty to this country.

And for good reason: at its best, America is an exceptional nation. It is a country built on limited government, the rule of law, and economic opportunity. Personal rights and liberties are still important here. They actually mean something. And our public life, while nonsectarian, is—or at least was—founded and grounded in a broadly biblical morality.

Here is why I mention this. I have a friend of many years—a man committed to his wife and family who is well educated and very Catholic—whose son attended West Point. Over the years he has taken great pride in his son and in the ideals of the military academy. He is still proud of his son, and he still admires the legacy of West Point.

But he would never send another child to a service academy. He simply doesn’t believe that America, as it currently stands, is the same country he once loved. And, in his words, it is not worth risking a son or a daughter to fight for it. The America he sees now—an America of abortion, confused sex, language police, entitlements, consumer and corporate greed, clownish politics, and government bullying of religious groups, like the Little Sisters of the Poor—is different in kind, not merely in degree, from the nation he thought he knew. It is no longer a country he considers his own. And keep in mind that this is a man of the cultural right, in which support for the military has typically been strong.

Now those are harsh feelings. But I do understand them.

There is a lot of talk in Christian circles today about the need to protect believing families from a flawed culture that often seems to be getting worse, and the talk frequently turns to a thing called the “Benedict Option.” It is an idea worth explaining.

Benedict of Nursia was a sixth-century Italian saint and the founder of Western monasticism. The son of a Roman nobleman, he left Rome as a young man for the peace of the countryside. He eventually founded twelve religious communities that grew into the worldwide Benedictine order of monks we have today. So the core of the modern Benedict Option involves finding a way to preserve people from the most dysfunctional elements of the secular world—either by building new communities or withdrawing mentally, or even physically, from the public culture around us.

It is a compelling idea. Critics don't do it justice when they write it off as a form of escapism.

But for me, as a bishop—and I have heard this from many other believers—I think an even better model is Saint Augustine, who led the fifth-century church in the North African city of Hippo Regius. Augustine lived and worked in the thick of his people. As a bishop, he engaged in the problems of the society around him every day—even as the Roman world fell apart and his own city came under siege.

I think we need to think and act in the same way Augustine did. Our task as believers, whatever our religious tradition, is to witness our love for God and for each other *in the time and place God puts us in*. That means we have duties—first to the City of God but also to the city of man. It means working with all our energy to make our nation whole and good, even as we keep our expectations modest and even when we experience criticism and failure. And finally, it means realizing that none of us can do this work alone, which brings us to this moment now—here, together, today.

Exactly six years ago, a great mentor and friend of mine came to this campus—Cardinal Francis George of Chicago. He spoke about Catholics and Latter-day Saints as partners in the defense of religious freedom. But he went further than that. He noted how often the LDS and Catholic concerns about marriage, family, poverty, the degrading effects of pornography, and the sanctity of the unborn child coincide. He also acknowledged that the differences between our two religious communities are large—and ignoring them serves neither God nor the truth.

But in his remarks here at BYU in 2010, Cardinal George stressed that despite those differences, “the possibilities of deepening our friendships through common witness and dialogue” are too important to underestimate and too urgently needed to let lapse.²

Cardinal George died just last year. He was one of the great Catholic minds of my generation, and he had an enduring respect for the LDS leaders and believers he knew.

I want to build on his words today by doing two things with the time that has been given me. First, I will offer some thoughts as a Catholic pastor about how and why we got to where we are as a nation. Second, I will talk briefly about what we need to do, in mutually supportive ways, as people of faith going forward.

How and Why Did We Get Where We Are?

While speaking last July, the political scholar Charles Murray argued that “the American project, as originally defined [by the Founders], is dead. [Not] dying, but dead.”³ Those are strong words. They pretty well take the air out of the room. And they come from a source—the author of studies like *Losing Ground* and *Coming Apart*—that we can't easily dismiss.

I should note here that Murray is a libertarian. Catholic thought has some serious problems with the libertarian approach to social philosophy. But that doesn't allow us to ignore his point, because much of Murray's research and analysis is high grade.

For Murray, the America of the Founders is dead because we killed it. We strangled it with a regulatory state that expands by its own inertia. It creates dependency and accumulates power as it provides services. As it grows, it eats into the space for personal liberty and rights, and it slowly replaces the authority of the people's elected representatives with an administrative machine. A good example is Obamacare. Congress passes a national health-care act. Then the administration “interprets” the law to impose a contraceptive mandate that deliberately attacks the conscience of many religious believers and ministries.

There is obvious merit in Murray's argument. What we had, once upon a time, was limited government. And that was a good thing.

The government we have now is something quite different and much more unsettling.

I do wonder if a continent-wide nation of 320 million people can really work in a globalized age without a big federal footprint. In any case, the changes in our country have deeper and more complex roots than just the growth of big government.

A simple example is demography. America was founded by white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. They were people steeped in English common law. Today Americans are vastly more numerous. They are also a lot more diverse. Many trace their heritage to cultures that have no experience of Christianity, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, or English common law. No one should fear that. America thrives on diversity. It needs immigration to constantly renew itself.

So demographic change is a very good thing, as long as some mechanism exists in society to weave people together into a nation with common ideals—ideals that are organic to our past and higher than our personal appetites. America is an idea, and the idea needs to have a moral substance greater than “every man for himself” or “do whatever you want, as long as it doesn’t hurt somebody else.” That is a hunting license, not a national purpose.

Another example is legal theory. Until recently, American law sought to apply a code of objective truth about good and evil to human affairs. This truth was understood to be written into the design of creation as a kind of natural law. All things, including the human person, were seen as having a nature and a purpose—a *telos*. As a result, human laws presumed a built-in moral order to the world. They presumed the “givenness” of nature, and the givenness of nature implied a Giver and a Creator—in other words, nature’s God. The natural rights we take for granted—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—are inalienable only because they are guaranteed by nature’s God, a God who stands above any human authority.

In most of our law schools, our public discourse, and our courts today, that idea is all but dead. Today’s so-called “positive law” doesn’t reflect and apply some higher order of justice. It invents justice by discovering new rights and juggling interests, and that means no rights are inalienable—whether our political class wants to admit it or not. To put it less kindly, a sort of fundamental lawlessness now governs our thinking about the law. In a nation like the United States, where the law is one of the main adhesives of our unity, that has very big implications.

Here is another example of how we got where we are: technology. Technology has played a big role—the decisive role—in changing our economic lives, often for the better. But it has also changed how Americans think. To put it another way, we use our tools but our tools also use us. In half a century the United States has gone from a manufacturing economy based on production to a knowledge economy based on consumption. The impact on our imaginations and our behaviors has been huge. Production is a joint affair. It requires guilds, unions, and corporations; it needs assembly lines, heavy industry, and communities. Consumption is a private affair. It requires only the self.

This difference between production and consumption is what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman called the gulf between “solid” societies and “liquid modern life.”⁴ Older, solid societies, which are based on production, find their security in ownership, delayed gratification, and rational organization. They seek methodical progress, and they put a high value on durable goods. Liquid, or consumer-based, societies—creatures of the tech revolution and its rapid rate of change—feed on “incessant new beginnings”⁵ and experiences.

What that means is this: in liquid consumer-based life, the biggest fear is what is called “drag coefficient”⁶—the burden of having to live with obsolete or bad product choices. Inevitably,

this approach to life shapes personal relationships. As Bauman noted, once the pattern “to reject and replace an object of consumption . . . is extended to partnership relations,” the partners themselves become disposable consumer objects.⁷ In this sense, nothing is more liquid than no-fault divorce, which is now common across the country.

I could go on with a list of examples for a long time, but before we turn to the last part of my remarks, I want to note just one more factor that divides the America we now have from the America we remember—or at least think we remember. That factor, of course, is sex—sex and relationships, sex and marriage, sex and the family, sex and human meaning.

To borrow a thought from C. S. Lewis, the human person is a kind of “amphibian”—a creature made by God for this world *and* the next, a blending of spirit and flesh that gives the body special dignity.⁸ The body is not modeling clay. It is not raw material at the service of our wills, and there is something profoundly sad about watching a person mutilate his or her body in the hope of creating a new identity. The body has a purpose. Our sexuality is ordered to creating and raising new life and to the mutual support of a man and a woman in a covenant of love.

My point is this: sexual confusion isn’t unique to our age, but the scope of it is. No society can sustain itself for long if marriage and the family fall apart on a mass scale. And that is exactly what is happening as we gather here today. The Supreme Court’s *Obergefell* decision, approving same-sex marriage last June, was a legal disaster. But it didn’t happen in a vacuum. It fits very comfortably with trends in our culture that go back many decades, even before the 1960s and the sexual revolution. It is useful to read or reread Wilhelm Reich’s book from 1936, *The Sexual Revolution*. Reich argued that a real revolution can only be made at the level of sexual freedom, and it needs to begin by wiping away

institutions like marriage, family, and traditional sexual morality.

What’s interesting about Reich’s work is that, eighty years ago, he saw the United States as the most promising place for that kind of revolution, despite its Puritan history.⁹ The reason is simple: Americans have a deep streak of individualism, a distrust of authority, and a big appetite for self-invention. As religion loses its hold on people’s behavior, all of these instincts accelerate. The trouble is that once the genie is out of the bottle, sexual freedom goes in directions and takes on shapes that nobody imagined. And ultimately it leads to questions about who a person is and what it means to be human.

Now all this is a pretty sober view of where we find ourselves. But we should remember two things.

Here is the first thing: Peter Drucker, the great expert on business and management, liked to say that every success bears the seeds of failure. What he meant is that people who succeed tend to forget that they are fallible. They get overconfident. They get lazy or vain. They forget that what worked yesterday may not work tomorrow. And that leads very quickly in a bad direction—even for nations. But the inverse of Drucker’s warning is also true: every setback and failure bears the seeds of success—if we learn the right lessons from it.

Here is the second thing: Just as optimism is very different from hope, a little pessimism—I prefer to call it realism—is a long way from hopelessness. *Optimism* is a kind word for wishful thinking. “Hope,” as Georges Bernanos liked to say, “is despair overcome,”¹⁰ and it is built on the granite of faith. People who really believe in a loving God are always people of hope and the joy that comes with it.

Augustine, who was a pessimist, could be a very hard critic of the Roman world, but in his sermons he called this earth a smiling place.¹¹ Portions of his work read like a litany to the goodness and beauty of creation. His

biographer, Peter Brown, described him as a man immoderately in love with the world. This is all true. And the reason for it is simple: Augustine loved the world because he was in love with the Author of the beauty and goodness he found there.

What does that mean for us today?

Augustine would tell us that the real problem with the world is bigger than climate change or abortion or poverty—or even two leading presidential candidates who seem equally distasteful—and it is much more stubborn. The real problem with the world is us.

As Augustine said in his sermons, it is no use complaining about the times because *we are the times*.¹² How we live shapes them. And when we finally learn to fill our hearts with something more than the noise and narcotics of the wounded societies we helped create, when we finally let our hearts rest in God as Augustine did, then—and *only* then—the world will begin to change, because God will use the witness of our lives to change it.

A few weeks ago, as I was working on my remarks for today, I got an email from a friend at Villanova University in Philadelphia. Professor Thomas Smith teaches in Villanova's Humanities and Political Science Departments. He also directs the university's honors program. He is a wonderful scholar, husband, and father and a very serious Catholic. I want you to hear what he wrote:

[Archbishop,] *I visited BYU last year to give a talk and spent considerable time with Mormon families and went to one of their Sunday services. Their theology is obviously very different from ours. But their culture is amazing, very intentional, and full of love and solidarity.*

One thing that really struck me: they have a palpable sense that they belong to a global church. Primarily, this comes from the mission work they

have to do. But it gives their participation in the church a much wider scope—they're not as obsessed with how they fit into American culture because their horizon is just wider and bigger.

We [meaning Catholics] absolutely need to learn from that. We have a much larger global church, and we need to participate in that more fully and intentionally. Young Catholics in the U.S. need to meet and become friends with serious young Catholics in Nigeria or Argentina or Italy and so on. Older ones do too. We need to engage, or reengage, the global church in a way that leavens everyone's culture.

That is high praise from a good man. I would add only this: never neglect to nourish your roots and your identity as a university grounded in faith. Faith in God is the road to life. Faith in a loving God is the light that illuminates and gives meaning to human reason and to all of life. Real excellence is a quality of the soul. And to borrow a line from the Gospel of Luke, the soul of this university and the soul of each and every one of us here today should “magnify the Lord” (Luke 1:46).

I'll leave you with one final thought.

In 1973 the neurologist Oliver Sacks published a book called *Awakenings*. It is the story of an experiment Sacks ran in 1969. Sacks gave the drug L-Dopa to a group of patients who had been catatonic for decades. The results were dramatic. The patients literally woke up to a much higher level of understanding, functioning, and communication. And they discovered a world that had greatly changed since their original illness.

The results were temporary. All the patients eventually slipped back into silence or developed other medical problems. But while they had their window of clarity they saw the world *as it really is*, and they experienced it with all of the wonder, suffering, fear, and joy that give life its grandeur.

What Do We Need to Do as People of Faith Going Forward?

We come back to the question I asked earlier: *What do we need to do as people of faith going forward?*

We can begin by remembering those patients. We need to wake each other up to see the world and our nation as they really are—the good along with the evil. We need to support each other in the work for the religious freedom we share. We need to treat each other as friends, not as enemies or strangers. We need to learn from each other’s successes and mistakes. And, unlike the patients of Dr. Sacks, we need to keep each other from slipping back into the narcotic haze that so much of America’s everyday life has become.

To put it another way: it is important for our own integrity and the integrity of our country to fight for our convictions in the public square. Anything less is a kind of cowardice. But the greater task is to live what we claim to believe by our actions—fidelity to God, love for spouse and children, loyalty to friends, generosity to the poor, honesty and mercy in dealing with others, trust in the goodness of people, and discipline and humility in demanding the most from ourselves.

These things sound like pieties, and that is all they are—until we try to live them. Then their cost and their difficulty remind us that we create a culture of human dignity in the measure that we give our lives to others. Nations change when people change, and people change through the witness of other people—people like each of you here today. You make the future. You build it stone by stone with the choices you make.

One of the unofficial mottos of Brigham Young University is “Enter to learn; go forth to serve.” “Go forth to serve”—it is a better exit line than anything I could ever write. Dear friends, go forth to serve. Serve the poor. Help the weak. Protect the unborn children. Fight for

your right to love and serve God and for others to do the same. Defend the dignity of marriage and the family and witness their meaning and hope to others by the example of your lives.

If you do that, you will inspire others to do the same. And you will discover in your own life what it means to be fully human.

Thank you, and God bless you.

Notes

1. Stanley Hauerwas, “The End of American Protestantism,” Opinion, *ABC Religion and Ethics*, 2 July 2013, abc.net.au/religion/articles/2013/07/02/3794561.htm.

2. Francis E. George, “Catholics and Latter-day Saints: Partners in the Defense of Religious Freedom,” BYU forum address, 23 February 2010.

3. “Rebuilding America: Charles Murray Joins Federalist Radio,” Federalist Radio podcast, 1 July 2015.

4. Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge; Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2007), 46, 94; see also 29.

5. Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 18.

6. See Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), xix; quoted in Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 9.

7. Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 21.

8. See C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1941), letter 8, paragraph 2.

9. See Augusto Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, ed. and trans. Carlo Lancellotti (Montreal, California: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 216.

10. Georges Bernanos, “France Before the World of Tomorrow,” in *The Last Essays of Georges Bernanos*, trans. Joan and Barry Ulanov (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955), 5.

11. See Saint Augustine of Hippo, sermon 158 on the New Testament, section 7.

12. See Saint Augustine of Hippo, sermon 30 on the New Testament, section 8.