How Heresy Spreads and the Error of Relativism - Part II

We find manifestations of relativism in many aspects of contemporary life though at times not clearly exposed. For example, take a family that professes the idea that having sexual intercourse outside of marriage is a sin. If the individual is single, it is a sin against the Sixth Commandment; if he is married, it is a sin against the Ninth Commandment. At the same time the family considers that no profession is more vile, indecent and disgusting than that of a prostitute, who sells her body to men overflowing with concupiscence. For this reason, they very rightly abominate such women and would expel them if they dared come into the house.

Normally, if a family were gathered in their house and a public woman entered against the will of the owner, the ladies of the house would retire immediately to another room while the man calls the police to take that filthy woman away. For she is so indecent that her mere presence in the same room with other ladies of an entirely different category is offensive to them. This is therefore a very radical and categorical attitude, which affirms with certainty that prostitution is something infamous and the sexual act practiced outside of marriage is indecent.

I was able to watch this transformation: When I was between fifteen and twenty, one of the characteristic features of an immoral woman was to paint herself up using lipstick, mascara and artificial eyebrows. Sometimes they would shave their eyebrows completely and have artificial eyebrows placed in a beauty salon, drawing a dark line as a prolongation of the eye, and make eye shadows that would give the impression she had been up all night flaunting her indecent life.

With the great change of customs that took place in the West after the First World War (1914-1918) they began to introduce a fashion whereby family girls and even ladies began to wear things that had characterized immoral women, and which, according to accepted custom, marked the differences between an immoral woman and a family lady.

For example, they began to paint their faces dark to imitate immoral women. Then to paint their lips so red as to cause the same effect; then to wear artificial eyebrows. The family maiden took up the air of an immoral woman to such a point that after a while, when going out on the street you would not know one from the other.

Now if a woman with such an infamous profession is worthy of contempt, how can a family girl in her purity and dignity as a future wife and mother, or perhaps a nun, wear the same attire with which an immoral woman proclaims to the world, “I am for sale, come and buy me, I am not a family girl.”

Isn’t it true that such an attitude is tantamount to a semi-acceptance to wear signs of infamy? Ultimately, whoever accepts such signs of infamy is implying that this infamy is not so infamous after all.

Here you see a relativist position: Parents who would expel a prostitute from their home at the same time pay for cosmetics and a beauty salon for their daughter to dress as much as possible like the prostitute! In the final analysis this contradiction indicates that the certainty they have about the infamy of prostitution does not penetrate all the way to the depths of their soul. That is why some of their actions are in contradiction with the certainty that prostitution is evil: This is relativism.

I know of cases where parents would notice their sons was not frequenting houses of perdition and would even facilitate it so as to be “normal” like other boys. How can a lady or man who considers a harlot an infamous being want to throw their son into her arms? If they consider the harlot’s trade as infamous, how can they want
their son to be part of that and even pay her to do precisely what they despise her for doing?

What does this contradiction mean? It means that deep down their certainty of infamy is relative. They think it is infamous to engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage but then begin to think that it is not that infamous for men, only for women. These contradictions indicate their principle is mere lip service, they really stand between certainty and uncertainty: Relativism.

He who stands between truth and error, is in fact, with error.

Once I was conversing with some people highly commended for their morality and asked them: Imagine the six or seven of us received an invitation to go to Europe on a small cargo ship with a magnificent well-assembled passenger section as happens especially with some German ships. The ship is small and we fill the area to capacity and are treated very well. Waiters are excellent and so are the maids. Everything is magnificent, the best you can imagine, and the price is so cheap that even we, rather poor people, could pay for that trip.

Two or three days into the trip, as we happily sip orange juice on the deck and eat delicious sandwiches made with imported ham and superb butter listening to some recording of splendid music and watching the high seas and blue skies and a person suddenly says:

‘You have no idea what I’ve discovered! This ship is a communist nest. Tomorrow, as we go into port the whole crew, made up of communists, will be replaced with other agents who spread communist propaganda. Our kind waiters, cooks, very helpful cleaning ladies and well-spoken captain are communists some of whom learned torture techniques in Russia and came to South America to teach their accomplices how to torture and wage guerrilla warfare. So in the evening when they bring your steaming and delicious dinner, remember: This man is a torturer who likes to listen to his victims moan and shout and die in his hands. This woman is a child tormentor who blinded 15 children and so on. I discovered this by listening to some of them talk when they were drunk.’

I ask, “What would you do?”

One guest responds: “If you knew about this you shouldn’t have told us to avoid a horrible problem of conscience so we could have gone to Europe in peace. You could have told us when we disembarked.”

Others said, “No, your obligation is to tell us about it right away, and we will disembark first thing tomorrow. We want nothing to do with these people.”

Still others said, “Oh no, the trip is going so well! Let those communist evildoers do us some good for the first time in our lives. We are going to Europe with them.”

They took the three possible positions. To the first one I asked, “Do you think that I should have told you about it as we disembarked?” “Yes, for sure.”

I replied, “No, I shouldn’t have, because after you have disembarked there will be no reason to tell you.” There was a reason to inform you immediately. If you believe you need to know this only when we disembark, you are in a contradiction, for it is on board the ship that you should know. I told you about it right away to create a problem of conscience to see how you resolve it.”

The person did not answer.

To the others who said they would remain on board, I would say, “You are relativists, men unconvinced about the evil of communism, and so you are not at all inconvenienced by being with and dealing with communist torturers. You are not inconvenienced just as long as the food is good, the bed clean, the bathtub washed, and you can stretch out in the sun. All is good, everything is right. You call yourselves anticommunists but deep down you are not, for a relativist anticomunist is a cloaked communist, not a true anticomunist.”

This leads us to the thesis that I like to defend as the true one that every good Catholic must sustain: Whoever stands between error and truth really stands with error. Deep down, the relativist accepts the error he does not dare to confess and merely pays lip service to the truth. After a few years, relativism leads a person to profess ideas contrary to those he used to have.

Over the years the same people I saw exhibiting external signs of a loose woman between 1920 and 1925, gradually did many things they used to condemn. They began to wear shorter bathing suits until they wore a bikini; they began to admit divorce, not for themselves as they didn’t divorce but they felt sorry for and agreed to get along with divorced people. They began to wear pants. They wound up doing everything they once found horrible. In 1975 these people are the opposite of what they were in 1925. Through a half century of evolution they almost came to the point of saying, ‘Look, a pros-
stitute is a poor thing and we must pity her.” This is all that is missing to finish their evolution. Who are these people? They are relativists, who characteristically, are always willing to accept a new error and always unwilling to defend a traditional truth to the end. They always give in to error, albeit slowly. Why? They dare not confess it to themselves because in the depths of their souls they are connatural with error.

Relativism: A Passport to Spread All Sorts of Errors

During my youth there was a man very close to my family who was a gentleman in his appearance and genealogy, and was also rich. Once during a family reunion, he visited my family frequently, as he and I were having a cup of coffee he looked at me and said, in a low tone of voice, like an old friend speaking to a young man: “Plinio, I wanted to take advantage of this moment that I am alone with you to tell you something. I see that you have very conservative ideas that are not for your generation. I want that you not to be fooled by this. You should be a socialist, and a left-wing socialist.”

I was very surprised to hear this from that man, who appeared to be a personification of the Counter-Revolution! I asked, “But why do you think so?” He said, “Look, everything is relative and every generation has a doctrine that it leaves to the next generation, which will change it.” So a truth that is entire in one generation is only a half-truth in the next generation and a complete error in the subsequent generation.

He went on: “My mother is a lady who has reactionary ideas that I would refuse. My mother is a royalist, and I am a Republican, but a bourgeois and conservative one. My children, who were more or less my age, must already be socialist Republicans, and my grandchildren must be communists because such is the evolution of the world. So, by holding fast to your ideas you are playing the fool because you don’t understand that everything is relative.”

This is relativism. So you understand the evil that relativism does. Relativism is a passport to spread all sorts of errors and evil and to justify the revolutionary process, which consists precisely in changing people’s ideas, tastes and habits little by little in such a way that after many years, without realizing it they become more and more revolutionary and entire generations become communist without even realizing it.

I maintain that this relativism does more harm to the cause of Christian civilization, to the Faith and the Catholic Religion than declared communism. Because the catastrophic changes we see around us would not be possible if all those who claim to be anticommunists really were, and if all those who call themselves Catholic really were. If these changes are made possible and the world becomes increasingly communist it is not because of communist propaganda. The number of full-fledged communists grows little over time. The great danger is this gradual march of the whole world toward paganism, this gradual abandonment of all doctrine and all Catholic morality, and the gradual acceptance of the opposite extreme. It is mainly this we have to fight.

Of course we must also fight fiercely against declared communism, and everyone here knows how much we have fought against communism. However what I mean is that communism doesn’t pose a great danger from the standpoint of attracting the good. The danger is semi-communism, ideas with communist content professed by people who sometimes speak against communism. This is how mankind gradually draws ever closer to communism. It’s the great modus operandi of communism.

Again I say that the direct struggle against communism is indispensable, urgent and of transcendental importance, but it alone isn’t enough. This struggle enables us to avoid communism for tomorrow but will be unable to avoid communism in ten or twenty years in the future because people increasingly find communism something natural.

We Must Live in Search of the Absolute
What conclusion do you draw from this? It’s that a true Catholic must think in a diametrically opposite way. He must have not only the conviction that external reality exists but that that he is capable of knowing it truly and objectively. Moreover, he must be able to know that behind everything that is changeable, ephemeral and passing in human life and in the universe there is an eternal and absolute Creator, the cause and source of all perfections and qualities that exist in all beings. These qualities can vary in beings, but in Him they never change.

When we perceive that which is variable, we are led to consider that which is invariable; and seeing the relative we are led to the consideration of the absolute. Take these flowers around Our Lady, for example. Sacred Scripture says the flower is a symbol of the fragility and transience of passing things. An excerpt from the Old Testament says, “Man is like a flower of the field. It’s morning, and it’s in all its beauty; and in the evening, it is no more.” Looking at these flowers I see they are fleeting, cut flowers doomed to death. They may be beautiful but their death is inevitable. However, I should see them as a symbol of God, eternal, absolute, im-
mutable, Who has in Himself a most perfect way that the qualities of which these flowers are a symbol, which never change in Him and which invite us to spend eternity in His presence to know and worship the immutability and absolute quality of all His predicates.

We must have a thirst for the Absolute, a desire for the Eternal, a craving for the unchangeable. We must want to leave this life precisely to reach a higher existence where nothing will change and everything will be fixed and eternal, resting in the contemplation of the beauty, perfection and absolute holiness of God that will never change and is inexhaustible, because I am limited but God is unlimited. Therefore, as I contemplate Him I will always have something new to see, something that for me will be one more eternal novelty. Even in eternity I will not know God entirely, so that to me God will be always new, absolute and perfect.

Because of that, my convictions must be just like my language, as Our Lord Jesus Christ says in the Gospel: “Let your words be, yea, yea or no, no.” What is, is; and what is not, is not. In other words, we must be affirmative and categorical men who believe what they say, who only say what they believe, and above all who have an absolute belief in the Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Adhere Enthusiastically to Truth or Become a Relativist

When we see around us people who seem to have similar convictions but are soft and lack enthusiasm in adopting these convictions we can suspect they are relativistic, because it is not possible for a person to hear certain things without becoming enthusiastic. If he is not enthusiastic it’s because he doesn’t believe. If he really believed he would be enthusiastic.

Here is a characteristic example: The early Franks converted by St. Remigius, Bishop of Reims, would hear of the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ. When they heard the infantries that were done against Our Lord Jesus Christ, Clovis and his warriors would raise their spears, and Clovis would say, “Would that I and my warriors had been there!” He wanted to get those people and straighten the situation out once and for all—the right way!

You cannot see the Son of God being killed and believe that the right thing to do is to sit by idly. That would be connivance with deicide. If I was to see a child being killed on the street or a criminal being killed by someone who is not with law enforcement and I fail to intervene, I am an accomplice. How much more so if I see the Son of God being killed. So those men had faith.

Now if someone were to watch the death of Our Lord Jesus Christ saying, “Poor man, how he is bleeding... True, it’s one o’clock in the afternoon and he is probably going to die at around three. Poor thing, I’m sorry for him. Now let me sip my soda.” Such a person does not believe that He was the Son of God. This indifference contradicts the belief that He is the Son of God. It already contains the germ and first step of relativism.

A Soul Without Relativism Has Faith Capable to Move Mountains

When we see people who tell us they have sound principles but who uphold contradictory and erroneous things, we must conclude they are relativists who ultimately want to contaminate us with their relativism. We must not only counter his error but also his relativistic mentality and say: In the face of his soft conviction my reaction is a profound, true and sincere act of faith that makes reparation to Our Lady. In the Gospel Our Lord praises the faith that moves mountains. Such is a soul without relativism, and this is how our faith must be. Of course, that supposes a very accurate analysis of the whole ambience including the ambience of the school in which you study and all other ambiances around you, the articles you read and the like.

This does not mean that you are constantly arguing with every relativistic person: “Look, what you’re saying is relativistic etc.” This is often imprudent. We shouldn’t be arguing or creating trouble with people to whom we owe respect and consideration or special charity. It’s often inappropriate for us to argue and better to keep quiet. But in our souls we must keep the conviction of the truth. Veritas Domini manet in aeternum, says the Old Testament. “God’s truth abides forever.” The Law of God, the dogmas of the Church, the principles of the natural order: All that is truly the basis of Christian civilization will never change.

These truths, principles and laws will continue in force even when the world ends and God comes to judge mankind. Our Lord said, “Heaven and earth shall pass, but my words shall not pass.” If there is an example of absolute belief and affirmation of the eternal truths we find it in Our Lord Jesus Christ, model of all virtues.

So we must be cautious about the influence of relativism and at the same time very energetic, very firm, very coherent in professing our ideas in the environments in which we live, although with the necessary prudence. This ends the exposition about relativism.

Plínio Corrêa de Oliveira
Saint of the Day
October 4, 1975