

My dear friends, (Relativism Homily - Part 2)

There are universal questions of meaning that arise in every generation, which continue to stir in our hearts: “Who am I? Am I the sum of what other people think of me? Does science exhaust the mystery of my existence? What is the purpose and meaning of life? Is it to work, make money, spend money, grab what pleasure and enjoyment one can, go to sleep, wake up and begin the same cycle again? Why do I desire happiness, and where is it to be found? I thirst for love, but what is love? Is love a romantic mood, a sentiment or feeling that comes and goes, or is love something stronger, more stable and enduring? Why is there suffering and death? Is there anything after death?

Why do these questions stir within us? Is it possible for such questions, so universal in scope, to have no answer? Or could it be that the very things these questions seek preexist our longings and desires, and are the reason we have these questions in the first place? Where or to whom shall we go to find the answers we are seeking? And given their depth and importance for our life, if we had to choose between a sure answer or merely someones subjective opinion--wouldn't we all prefer certainty? Are there sure answers to these questions of meaning?

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14). The eternal Word of the Father, God's only beloved Son, who is the eternal Truth through whom and for whom all things were made and exist, is, Himself, the Truth we are seeking in these questions of meaning. Standing before Pilate, Jesus said: “For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, **to bear witness to the truth**. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice” (Jn 18:37). And that we do not mistake the teaching of Jesus as simply another collection of wise sayings among others, He said to His disciples: “I am the way, **the truth**, and the life” (Jn 14:6). Jesus not only speaks the truth, He also proclaims what no other prophet or teacher before or after Him would dare say: “**I am the truth.**”

Everything about Jesus Christ, His life, His words and actions reveal **the truth**: the truth about God, the truth of God's saving plan and will, and in light of these, the full and deepest truth about ourselves. St. John of the Cross rightly said, “In His son Jesus Christ, God has said everything He wanted to say to us.”

This saving truth proclaimed by Christ has become for all times the “verdant pastures” of the Church by which the Lord continually nourishes His precious flock--**“Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”** (Mt 4:4). It is by feeding on His word that we can *be sure* about who God is, who Jesus is, *sure* about who we are as image bearers of God and what we become in Christ, *sure* about the mercy of God and the forgiveness of our sins, *sure* about the ultimate meaning of life, *sure* about what happiness is, what love is, *sure* about the redemptive value and meaning of suffering, *sure* about a blessed life after death for the children of God. This is why Jesus says: “**And you shall know the**

truth and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32). By this truth we are set free from the darkness of ignorance and doubt, set free from guilt and shame, set free from an empty, meaningless life, set free from hopelessness and despair, set free from the narrowness and misery of an ego-centered life, set free from the fear of death.

God means us to live on solid ground, confident and secure in the truth: "**Whoever hears these words of mine and lives them, will be likened to a man who builds his house on the rock**" (Mt 7:24-27). But there is an enemy, the force and presence of another at work in the world who has an evil motive. Jesus calls him "the wolf," a "thief" and "robber," who comes into God's fold to snatch the sheep away from the Good Shepherd, away from these verdant pastures of truth, hoping to destroy and kill them (Jn 10). While "the wolf" can symbolize the ungodly who lead people astray, it can also refer to the devil and his efforts to do the same. One way Satan has been very successful of late is through the "**philosophy of relativism.**" Relativism calls into question the certainty and objectivity of the truth revealed by God and the truth discoverable in nature through philosophy, and makes it all relative to the individual, thereby reducing the notion of "truth" to the level of mere sentiment and personal opinion.

Both Blessed John Paul II and his successor, Pope Benedict, taught that this **philosophy of relativism** is one of the greatest problems of our time--creating a *crisis of meaning* (that leads to meaningless lives). In 2002, to a great crowd of youth gathered for World Youth Day, Blessed John Paul II warned of "false teachers today, belonging to an intellectual elite in the worlds of science, culture and media who present an anti gospel. When you ask them 'what must I do,' their only answer is that there is no definite truth, no sure path. Consciously or not, they advocate an approach to life that has led millions of young people into a sad loneliness that deprives them of **hope** and makes them incapable of **real love.**" When a Cardinal, Pope Benedict echoed similar concerns when he stated that "a particular insidious obstacle to the task of education today is the massive presence in our society and culture of relativism, which, recognizing nothing as definitive, leaves as the ultimate criteria only the self with it's desires."

Real hope comes from knowing that our life has a great purpose, an objective, ultimate purpose: to know, love and serve the living God in this life, so as to be eternally happy with Him in the next. This ultimate meaning is what makes all the challenges, trials and crosses of life worth it. There is also such a thing as '**real love,**' revealed in all its power, goodness and beauty by Christ on the Cross. Thankfully, this love is so much more than a passing sentiment or feeling--it is, in fact, a virtue, a capacity within us, aided by grace, that enables us to choose and commit to the good of another no matter what the cost, even to the laying down of our life. **Relativism** robs people of this authentic hope and love, depriving them of any real happiness. Instead of an objective hope and love that I discover and embrace, relativism encourages people to go with whatever they 'feel' love or life's meaning to be. In the end, consciously or not, one is left with nothing more than a

self-made idol, a 'cut-and-paste-job' of one's own personal feelings, tastes and selfish desires, the historically proven recipe of a 'dead-end-life' that becomes increasingly empty, boring, miserable and self-destructive.

One can immediately see the problem this can cause with faith. Faith is the belief that God is a real being that we can come to know, and that God has revealed Himself and wants to be known. To reduce God to an idea that can be anything we happen to think, does not leave us with God, but with a god of our own imagining. This has produced one of the most popular relativistic statements in circulation today that runs something like this: "It doesn't really matter what you believe or what religion you are--God doesn't care--as long as you follow your belief and are a good person, that's all that matters." What is especially alarming is that there are many Christians who hold this view. Amazing! Is this what Jesus suffered and died for? One has to wonder how anyone could possibly reduce the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels to something so shallow, uncertain, wimpy and apathetic.

We also believe that this same living God has revealed what is truly right and good for us. With relativism the Commandments of God become at best, suggestions--leaving one free to follow them or not. If any of these commandments should not "feel" right, or not fit conveniently into one's vision of life, "that's OK--it's all relative." 'Cafeteria Catholicism,' where one picks and chooses only what 'they like' about Jesus and the faith, is one of the effects of relativism, or at least, certainly made easier because of it.

The traditional understanding of truth is: 'that which conforms to reality.'" When my subjective mind discovers the objective truth of things outside itself and conforms to them, only then is my thinking true. With relativism, in areas of faith and morals, one does not base their ideas or beliefs on any objective truths apart from oneself, rather, each person is the creator of their own values, even in what is believed about God. The lines between what actually is true and what is imagination become blurred. In the end, the only thing held as certain in this relativistic world of 'make-believe,' is that nothing is certain. This kind of irrational thinking, which we call a "self contradicting proposition," is how relativism shoots itself in the foot--for if "nothing is certain," then neither is the claim that "nothing is certain."

Because the stakes are high when it comes to knowing the truth, Satan tries to separate us from the One who is the Truth, from the verdant pastures of truth God has revealed. And if Satan cannot entirely separate us, he does everything he can to distort the truth, water it down, create doubt and confusion--and this is exactly what relativism has been doing. Scripture rightly calls Satan "the father of lies," and it is through relativism that he continues to deceive many people, infecting the whole cultural mindset with this errant philosophy.

To completely unmask the devils deception here, let's be clear on what relativism is. Relativism is the belief that there is no sure, objective truth when it comes to matters

of faith or morals--such things are relative to each individual. Everything except scientifically verifiable fact is really nothing more than personal sentiment, feeling and opinion. And what is more, no matter what opinion is held, there is no right or wrong--all opinions are considered equally valid--even if they are contradictory. If someone says "Jesus is God for me," and another says, "Jesus is not God for me," according to relativism, each of these can be true if it feels or seems true for that person. As a result, when it comes to faith, morals and questions of meaning, such thinking leads to common expressions like: "what's true for you is true for you; what's true for me is true for me" or, "what does it matter--as long as I'm not hurting anyone," or "Who am I to judge or say that my beliefs are better than someone else?"

At a closer look it becomes difficult to be consistent with this kind of thinking without sounding ridiculous. For example, a common response we hear today is: "I know this is right because it feels right." When I was younger I often felt like strangling my brother--should I have followed my feelings? I've also heard some argue, in a purely subjective way, that "each person should be able to follow their own heart." But shouldn't this depend on what's in their heart? Should one follow their heart like Hitler did? Another common phrase is: "it's right as long as one is sincere." But sincerity does not make something right--we all know that one can be sincerely wrong. And for those who say "there's really no universal values of right and wrong, it's all culturally constructed, so who am I to judge." It's interesting how quickly they change their mind before acts of horrific violence, like 9/11.

To completely disclose the work of the devil and show how subtle he can be, even disguising himself as an 'angel of light,' like the bible says, I want to use the recent example of the legalization of gay unions in our state of Minnesota. I will use this example to show how relativism shifts clear, objective reasoning to nothing more than emotional appeals, how relativism waters down and confuses the meaning of certain words like marriage, family, love, compassion, equality, and fairness, how this confusion makes it easier for the pupils of relativism to argue their positions, and how they will use these same words to shut down any disagreement, bully and villainize their opponents, and win others over to their way of thinking.

Before proceeding, I want to make it very clear that this is not in any way a judgment of the intentions or good will of anyone caught up in relativism--we should never assume ill will here or malicious intent. Neither is this a condemnation of any individual--for relativism has been entrenched in our culture for several decades now, practically in the air we breath, such that many have grown up with this faulty way of thinking without knowing it. There is indeed a great deal of blindness and ignorance surrounding this problem today, which should awaken our compassion and make us gentle and patient with those who have been seduced into this philosophy.

To address the problem of relativism with the example of the legalization of same-sex unions in the State of Minnesota, I want to start by quoting part of a letter I received recently from a politician whom I will leave unnamed--it's an excellent piece of relativistic thinking--I have highlighted some of the key words and phrases that are problematic:

“Dear Steven,

I know how **marriage** promotes healthy, stable, long-term relationships, and I believe that every **loving, committed couple** should be **treated equally** under the law. That's why I became an early and vocal supporter of **marriage equality**.

The extension of **marriage rights** to gay and lesbian couples will only strengthen Minnesota **families**. This is a fundamental issue of **fairness** and **equality**; it's about providing the **rights** and privileges that those of us who are already married take for granted. I was proud when our state legalized same-sex marriage, ensuring that all Minnesota families receive **equal rights**, benefits, and recognition. I also applauded the Supreme Court's decision to strike down a key provision of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) as unconstitutional. The DOMA decision recognizes that our constitutional commitment to equal protection of the laws requires that the federal government **treat all couples equally**. In the wake of the Supreme Court's decision, we must continue to make progress toward **full marriage equality**, and that is why I was proud to once again cosponsor the Respect for Marriage Act, which would strike down the remaining portions of DOMA not addressed by the Supreme Court decision.

As progress toward **marriage equality** continues, I will work to ensure that all Americans enjoy **equal rights** and **fair treatment**.”

This is certainly a well written letter, written by a person with strong convictions--but upon what is anything he said based? He uses words like marriage, family, love, and equality, which make his message sound convincing--for who is not for these things? Yet, those opposed to gay marriage also use these same words, but obviously with a different understanding. This is exactly the main problem with relativism and why it easily confuses people, it continues to use ‘the language,’ but the language is disconnected from any real objective reference of meaning.

A good example is with the concept of **marriage**. As Christians, we believe that the truth of marriage has an objective source: God who has revealed it, and our human nature that reflects and affirms it. God is the Author of marriage, and our bodies, which God made male and female, clearly reflects this (Gen 1:27, 2:24). Given this objective reference, if we are “realists,” we cannot change what God has clearly revealed and written into our bodies. Relativism has disconnected marriage from this solid, objective source, leaving questions of marriage to be decided by each individual, by whatever the prevailing winds may be of human opinion and sentiment. But **feelings** cannot create values, nor can feelings be the indicator for

whether something is good or evil--they are amoral, present in both virtue and vice. Values are learned and chosen, and sometimes chosen against our feelings, which may be contrary to what is truly good for us. And if someone has an opinion, with what do we measure opinions to know if they are true and good for us? Hitler was of the opinion that all Jews should be exterminated--if we say he was wrong, on what do we base our opinion? It can't be feelings, for Hitler felt he was right.

Because we believe that marriage has objective foundations, we have a true reference to measure and critique all other ideas of marriage that spring from the subjectivity of any given person. This is why we cannot accept as normal, or as the "new normal," a same-sex union as marriage. A "two in one flesh" union is not possible between them--only a man and a woman can be joined as "two in one flesh," able to fulfill the Lord's command to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen 1:27, 2:24).

The moment anyone voices disagreement to same sex unions there are all kinds of reactions and accusations hurled at them. For example, how often it is presumed that to disagree automatically means we are judging such persons, that we are not very loving, that we are lacking in compassion, etc. Many are reduced to silence by such accusations--for what Christian or decent person would want to be accused of being critical or condemning of another person, or lacking in love or compassion? But this is how relativism confuses people, and bullies those who disagree. If we do not hold fast to the solid foundation of objective truth, our glorious Faith will continue to be eroded by their emotional appeals and accusations.

Let's bring more clear, refreshing objectivity to these accusations. First of all, we have to remember that for those with a relativistic mindset, many of their words and opinions have been divorced from any objective source of meaning--they may be expressed with great sincerity and emotion--but their measure is based on what they feel is true, not what actually is true. To accuse someone of 'judging' because they disagree is a failure to make a simple distinction. There is a big difference between making judgments about the good or consequences of any given thought, choice or action, and condemning a person. We have to make judgments all the time: "should I buy this car or that one; which college will best help me achieve my future career goals; would it be right for me to offer help to the family next door that just lost their daughter; would it be wrong for me to keep the extra money the cashier gave me at the store; if I am married, should I foster and follow these thoughts and desires to have sex with my neighbor; should I give my child up for adoption or have an abortion?"

Based on the objective truth written into our nature--which we call 'natural law'--which is further affirmed and clarified by God's revelation, we can make 'sound judgments.' I can say, for example, that if a pregnant woman has only two choices--to give her child up for adoption or have an abortion--the only right choice would be adoption. This judgement is based on the gift that life is, the inherent right to life of

the child, and the sovereignty of the Lord over all life and who is ultimately the One who gives life. On this truth we can also say that abortion is objectively wrong, and there is nothing that could ever make it right. But while I can judge the act itself, I can never condemn the person who has the abortion--I cannot judge their subjective state--that realm belongs to God alone. We can't know how much the person may know, if there is ignorance about the life within her, ignorance about the evil of abortion; there may be strong feelings of fear and isolation weakening her freedom, etc. So, even though the act is objectively wrong, we cannot judge any person's subjective state or guilt--only God can judge this.

Based on this same source of objective truth, I can say that same-sex attraction and unions are contrary to our nature and to God's plan for our life--there are clear references about this in both the Old and New Testament. But again, what I cannot do is condemn or criticize anyone who struggles with such an attraction, for in many cases they have not chosen it--it is rather the effect of various things that have happened to them. But just because I voice disagreement, soundly based on what God has revealed and written into our nature, this does not automatically mean I lack either love or compassion. If I did, these would be serious accusations indeed, for they are contrary to the very heart of the Gospel. But again, we have to keep in mind that words like "love" and "compassion" in relativism have no grounding in anything objective--they are nothing more than personal sentiments or feelings.

What does it mean to **love** someone or to show them **compassion**? Does loving another mean that I also accept and agree with all their choices and actions? As I mentioned above, love has its ultimate, objective reference in Christ, who is the love of God revealed, love concretely in the flesh. At the core, love is a choice and commitment to the good of another--but the moment we mention "the good," we have to ask what "the good" is. Here too, as Christians, we believe that "good" has an objective reference, both in natural law and the revelation of God. If I love someone I will want what is good for them, things like food, clothing, shelter, good health, dignified work, etc. These things are certainly part of a happy, healthy human life. But there are also spiritual goods that rank much higher than other goods, like salvation, life in Christ, friendship with God and eternal life. The greater the good, the greater the love. No one loves us more than God, for His love is always based on wanting to bless and share with us these greater goods: salvation, divine friendship, eternal life. Since God's love is based on these true, objective goods, His love for us will also mean He will protect us and lead us away from anything contrary to our good, such as sin and error. **St. Paul** expresses this clearly in his 1st letter to the Corinthians: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1Cor 6:9-11). St. Paul is not speaking

against the fallen tendencies to the above sins, for we all experience them at different moments in our life, but only the deliberate indulgence in them.

Given all that's been said above, our love is a 'true love' if it is based on the truth, on what is truly good, and the same can be said with compassion. It follows, then, that to love homosexual persons in the truth and show them compassion will not mean accepting or encouraging their homosexual tendencies, for this is contrary to revealed truth and the truth written into our bodies. To love them will mean showing great understanding and patience for their struggle, encouraging them to pray and seek help from God. We don't entirely understand the causes of this disorder. Though genetic arguments have not yet found much basis in scientific evidence, there is much evidence available to show it's connection to a wound or lack in a child's psycho-sexual identity development. The sad thing about the legalization of same sex unions and the attempt to normalize them, is that it is yet another denial of our culture of the reality of original sin and it's daily effects in our broken world, and a denial of the need for a Savior, the need for redemption and healing.

Loving homosexual persons in the truest sense is to lead them gently and patiently into the arms of Jesus where they will receive the light to clarify their true identity and the true meaning of their sexuality. In these arms of Jesus they will also receive the grace of healing and redemption, a greater freedom and strength to live God's plan for them. It may be a long, difficult road, which will require much compassion on our part, and a lot of patience and trust on theirs--but this is the path clearly marked out by God's revealed will.

Other words that the politician uses above, like "rights," "fairness," and "equality," can only mean anything if they are related and connected to what is objectively and inherently good for human beings. And here again, the "good" cannot be defined by us to be whatever each person feels or wants it to be--this would place our rights and equality on very shaky ground indeed. The "good" upon which our rights, our equality, our freedom and happiness depend, did not originate with our thoughts or feelings on the matter--but on the mind and will of One much greater than us--the One who made us. That which is objectively "good" is, therefore, something we discover and either embrace or reject--this is always the choice before us. The good news is that God is always there to help us in our weakness and offer mercy when we have fallen.

I hope this further explanation on relativism has been helpful. Please let me know if you have any further questions. Let's continue walking together in the light of Truth so we can enjoy the freedom of the children of God and the security of lives built and lived on the Rock.

God love you,
Fr. Steven

