

IT SHOULD COME NATURALLY (2.16.2014)

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Ever since last Sunday, I've been thinking about salt. If you'll think back to the gospel reading, you'll recall that our Lord commanded us to be "the salt of the earth." But what happens when salt loses its taste? This question has been bothering me all week, because (and I don't know why it never occurred to me before) salt can't lose its taste. It's either sodium chloride or its not. I have it on the authority of noted Princeton physicist, Doctor Linus Dolce that this is an established scientific fact. *However...* I have it on the authority of Google, that historically, salt has been obtained from crude sources such as marshes, and quarries which contain not only sodium chloride but also many other components. Therefore, since sodium chloride is water-soluble, if this crude salt is exposed to condensation or rain, the sodium chloride might be dissolved and removed, thus in effect depriving the salt of its saltiness. [Ha! Take that, Princeton!]

Of course, we can skirt the whole issue by acknowledging that Jesus was speaking figuratively. Last week, He demanded that we be the spiritual, ethical, moral, cultural "salt of the earth." So, then. What does salt do? It preserves, it makes palatable, it strengthens and invigorates the human body. It can even (and this too I have this on the authority of noted Princeton physicist, Dr. Linus Dolce) lower the freezing point of water. Now clearly, Jesus was not asking his followers to lower the freezing point of water. So we must look more deeply into the parable for the allegorical meaning. Remember He also called us "the light of the world." So what does light do? It dispels darkness. (That too is an established scientific fact.) Very well then. We the salt and light, are called by Jesus to preserve, to strengthen, to invigorate and to *enlighten* our world.

But what happens when we lose our taste? What happens when we hide our light under a bushel basket? What happens when we neglect our purpose? This week, in our reading from Sirach, we received the answer: "Before man are life and death, good and evil. Whichever man chooses shall be given him." And in the gospel: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven... whoever says, 'You fool,' will be liable to fiery Gehenna... If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna."

In my senior apologetics class this week, I introduced my students to the concept of Natural Law. By way of introduction, I placed on a table in the center of the room two cans of tomato soup, a can opener, and a hammer. "Have a look at this can," I told them. "It's shape—it's physical nature—dictates how it is to be used. The most efficient, the most expedient way to open this can is to use a can opener." I then opened the can. "Mmmm. Delicious tomato soup."

But is there another way to open the can?

"Yes!" my students cried. "Use the hammer!"

I don't think they expected me actually to use the hammer—but I did. I let loose on that can of soup like I was playing whack-a-mole. There was soup on the table, soup on me, soup on the kids, soup on the ceiling... children were diving for cover, reaching in panic for laptops, textbooks, and iPads. By the time the can could be considered open, the soup itself was inedible. "You see," I explained, "there is a law written in the very nature of things which dictates their

proper use. We call this Natural Law, and when we violate this law, we end up with a terrible mess.” Therefore, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter can pass from this law. And whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so... Well, you’ve witnessed the consequences.

On a cultural level, we American Catholics have been hiding our light under a bushel-basket. We’ve violated the law and taught others to do so. On a societal level, we’ve created a terrible mess. Mind you, Natural Law is not Catholic. It’s not Christian. It’s not Jewish. It is the very nature of things. And the law is written on *every* human heart. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero knew this. Because natural law is revealed and enforced by nature itself. When you abuse alcohol, you get a hangover. When you abuse your body, you contract diseases. When you abuse your habitat, you make it unlivable. And when you abuse a can of tomato soup, you ruin your student’s laptop. Across the board, when you violate Natural Law, you cause grief, confusion, and panic.

Blessed John Paul II put it this way: **“Civic life has been scarred by...bizarre interpretations of human values... They stretch from materialism and hedonism, which attack the values of large close-knit families, to false ethical theories concerned with attitudes to newly conceived life. Such erroneous ‘moral’ guidance has been steering generations of young people towards a nihilism that cripples the will and leaves it unable to face up to crucial problems...”** [If you don’t believe this is true, just turn on your television.] **“Many modern evils”** he goes on to say, **“stem from the defection of the baptized and of believers falling away or seduced in great numbers from the profound truths of their faith and the doctrinal and moral vigor of their traditional Christian view of life, a view which had guaranteed a right balance to individuals and to communities alike.”**

So we find ourselves in a state of cultural, ethical, even artistic meltdown. The situation is almost comically bad. As one of my favorite monks likes to point out, they’ve taken away my *reductio ad absurdum*. I used to be able to say, “What’s next? Gladiatorial combat?” But wait. We’ve got that now. It’s called cage fighting. Witches teaching in Catholic schools? Georgetown¹ got one of those years ago. Polygamy? Wait. The “Sister Wives” just won a big case in Utah. Pornography on public television? We’ve got that too. It’s all mainstream now.

But “we speak a wisdom to those who are mature, not a wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age who are passing away.” Thomas Aquinas wrote that when a nation suffers tyranny, it is up to those who enthroned the tyrant to remove him. But “...we are now so thoroughly under the tyranny of our vices” writes J. Budziszewski in his essay entitled *The Revenge of Conscience*, “that it would be difficult for us to recognize an external tyrant at all. By our own hands we enthroned [our vices]: our strength no longer suffices for their removal: they have suspended the senate of right reason and the assembly of the virtues: the emperor, our will, is held hostage...”

So how do we resist this? Do we run out into the streets peaching hellfire and brimstone? It seems to me we have that already. We call it “reality tv.” Our brightest young stars are manifestly miserable. No. Instead, we need first to recognize that there is an immutable law written on the human heart, then we need to pray for a love of that law, and lastly, we need to summon the courage to point out the consequences of violating that law, and resist all attempts to subvert it.

If you choose to do so, you can keep the commandments, and they will save you; if you choose to trust in God, you too shall live. He has set before you fire and water. To

¹ I got this wrong. In fact, it’s Boston College, and she stopped teaching there in 1999.

whichever you choose, stretch forth your hand. Before you are life and death, good and evil, whichever you choose shall be given you.

And so we pray, “Instruct me, O LORD, in the way of your statutes, that I may exactly observe them. Give me discernment, that I may observe your law and keep it with all my heart.” In the name of the Father...