

Christianity Without Guardrails

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Fr. Dwight Longenecker finished reading Rusty Reno's new book and is now ready to declare that we are heading for World War III. But Longenecker's article illustrates that a world war, spiritual in nature, is already upon us.

Longenecker's review of Reno's book details some of Reno's core arguments. In his reading, there was a post-war consensus that has led influential actors across disciplines to "get rid of dogma," to dispel with the idea that objective truth exists. Longenecker expands on this idea and argues that Christianity itself was not spared, that many in the Church effectively gutted Christianity of its insistence on dogmatic principles.

The result is that, in a world without dogma, people don't have enduring truths to anchor them. Consequently, they are set adrift to blow wherever they please and to whatever allows them to feel best about themselves and the world. This is dangerous because people who are ungrounded are easily riled up and prone to violence.

Longenecker also criticizes post-war (read: post Vatican-II) church leaders –and implicitly Pope Francis–for their failures to reverse this slide toward relativism. He suggests that embracing synodality and failing to "teach clearly," the Church has allowed this to happen. In Longenecker's view, the solution is to insist on dogma again, lest world leaders, in their quest for power, bring us to the brink of war. Likewise, Longenecker says that Reno is advocating for a return of "three strong gods" –home, country, and religion–that can right the wrongs of the post-war consensus and re-instill dogma at the center of our lives.

Longenecker is not completely wrong. In fact, all modern popes have warned about the dangers of relativism. The pope emeritus, for example, explicitly chose the name Benedict in honor of the ancient saint, and for what he did for Europe during tumultuous times. Pope Benedict, a native German, was acutely aware of what relativism–and its implicit assault on truth as a principle–was doing to the Church in the West.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, echoing Reno's overall assessment, Pope Francis wrote:

In many places, the problem is more that of widespread indifference and relativism, linked to disillusionment and the crisis of ideologies which has come about as a reaction to anything which might appear totalitarian. This not only harms the Church but the fabric of society as a whole. We should recognize how in a culture where each person wants to be bearer of his or her own subjective truth, it becomes difficult for citizens to devise a common plan which transcends individual gain and personal ambitions.

That said, if there was a post-war consensus, its roots can be traced to much earlier than 1945. Patrick Deneen writes in *Why Liberalism Failed* about the large philosophical and cultural developments that were in place at the United States' founding. America itself, as were many other western countries, was built with liberal principles in mind. Deneen argues that these principles were inevitably bound to produce relativizing forces, absent strong meditating institutions, and eventually a new dogma of aggressive anti-dogmatism too.

All these thinkers and writers essentially make the same point and the same observation: that relativism is a challenge to the mission of the Church and also a wake-up call. Benedict in particular addressed relativism over the course of his papacy. In his encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict writes, "Truth, by enabling men and women to let go of their subjective opinions and impressions, allows them to move beyond cultural and historical limitations and to come together in the assessment of the value and substance of things."

We, Christians in the contemporary western world, live in a culture that offers us fewer "guardrails," societal mores that reflect, even if imperfectly, Christian truth and justice. We can and should lament a world that is more confusing, more difficult, that offers more evil choices, and is skeptical about religion and shame. In many ways, the world is worse off, not better, for the West's exaltation of the individual, personal freedom, subjective truth, and self-determination. It is more challenging today to respond fully to God's gift of mercy.

At the same time, these challenges are not insurmountable nor are they entirely negative. Our culture reveals a heightened need for the Church to reinvigorate truth in each Christian's life, so that each of us might live in the fullness of faith, without "jumping the curb." Like a streetlamp that helps us to navigate our path in life, a renewed and deepened relationship with Christ can preserve us in holiness, even as the world is constantly distracting us and tempting us to drive "off-road."

Moreover, these guardrails, as helpful as they have been over the course of history to support people in the faith and to create a more just society, cannot in any way be considered synonymous with faith itself. In fact, failure to nurture that faith through effective evangelization and catechesis over the years is partly why we find ourselves in this situation today. As these guardrails were removed through cultural shifts and a widespread acceptance of relativism, it became clear that the Church in the West had

been too complacent, assuaged by the restraints that secular society, enriched as it was through its Judeo-Christian heritage, once placed on its members. It seems we only appeared to be holy, when in reality the Church was rotting from the inside out.

Similar to this point, Pope Francis writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*,

Spiritual worldliness, which hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church, consists in seeking not the Lord's glory but human glory and personal well-being. It is what the Lord reprimanded the Pharisees for: "How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?" (*Jn* 5:44). It is a subtle way of seeking one's "own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (*Phil* 2:21). It takes on many forms, depending on the kinds of persons and groups into which it seeps. Since it is based on carefully cultivated appearances, it is not always linked to outward sin; from without, everything appears as it should be. But if it were to seep into the Church, "it would be infinitely more disastrous than any other worldliness which is simply moral".

We, the Church, simply did not do enough over the years to nurture faith in its members. The present crisis reflects that. It is much easier to act rightly to cultivate a certain appearance or out of fear of being shamed and ostracized than out of a response to the prompting of the Spirit. Today, we are more aware of the harm that shaming and ostracizing others causes, but, at the same time, the Holy Spirit is almost an afterthought in our preaching. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Church in the West is shrinking.

It is important here to distinguish between "truth" and "truths." For example, when Benedict is arguing about the importance of truth to society and about its role in moving people beyond mere opinion, he is not speaking merely of truth as a philosophical concept. Rather, he is speaking of truth as a person. "[Jesus] himself is the truth," writes Pope Benedict in *Caritas in Veritate*. It is an impoverishment of Christianity to insist on truths—moral, philosophical, doctrinal—to the exclusion of, or confusion with, Jesus as truth. Truths help to reveal progressively who God is, but it is only Jesus, as truth, who purifies all disciplines and orients them in his love. Without adhering to truth as a Person who loves, our truths are at risk of being infected with indifference or hate. Disappointingly, much of the conservative Catholic reaction to modern relativism and individualism smacks of indifferent moralizing, where prohibitions are proffered as necessary guardrails without any reference to God's free gift of love and mercy.

Pope Francis writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*,

When preaching is faithful to the Gospel, the centrality of certain truths is evident and it becomes clear that Christian morality is not a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults. Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others. Under no circumstance can this invitation be obscured! All of the virtues are at the service of this response of love.

Even if there is widespread agreement upon the essential points between Reno/Longenecker and Pope Benedict XVI/Pope Francis, there is significant disagreement between them about what the solution is in the present environment. Yes, there is a need to re-emphasize the role of truth and its importance for everyone in daily life, but it is not as simple as providing what has been lacking over the years. This isn't an algebra problem where the solution is achieved by cancelling out the equation. We can't simply argue that morality is important, or that God should be at the center of our lives. The reality is that we are in a new world filled with new challenges and obstacles.

When Christianity is reduced to an argument, it must compete with many other arguments of the day, the vast majority of which appear imminently more attractive than the gentle yoke of Christianity. Cardinal Ratzinger described this problem in 2002 when he wrote, "All too often arguments fall on deaf ears because in our world too many contradictory arguments compete with one another, so much so that we are spontaneously reminded of the medieval theologians' description of reason, that it 'has a wax nose': in other words, it can be pointed in any direction, if one is clever enough. Everything makes sense, is so convincing, whom should we trust?" The answer to decades of bad catechesis is not better catechesis, which presumes at the very least that people have the desire to live out what is being taught. We have to start with evangelization and work to foster an encounter with the beauty and love of God, where he can "strike at the heart" and open up the person to a new life in the Spirit.

Longenecker is critical of the modern Church's approach, to accompany and listen. He writes, "The mealy mouthed leaders of our church who talk of nothing but dialogue, listening, accompanying and the need for a pastoral approach are basically selling us the same relativism that the world has to offer." This reeks of a misunderstanding of Francis's approach to the Church's mission of evangelization. In almost direct opposition to Longenecker, Francis writes,

We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God's love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives.

We see here that "listening" is not devoid of content, nor is its purpose merely to confirm

people in their situations. Rather, listening is “closeness” through which we can help make possible an encounter with God that the other may not have had otherwise.

In a similar vein, Francis would disagree with Longenecker’s interpretation of accompaniment as “basically the same” as relativism. Francis explicitly rejects any notion of accompaniment that does not lead people closer to God. Francis writes,

Although it sounds obvious, spiritual accompaniment must lead others ever closer to God, in whom we attain true freedom. Some people think they are free if they can avoid God; they fail to see that they remain existentially orphaned, helpless, homeless. They cease being pilgrims and become drifters, flitting around themselves and never getting anywhere. To accompany them would be counterproductive if it became a sort of therapy supporting their self-absorption and ceased to be a pilgrimage with Christ to the Father.

Listening and accompaniment, rightly considered and practiced, have little in common with relativism. Rather, they are necessary activities that facilitate an encounter with God. They are, in this way, the foundation of modern evangelization, especially since they sidestep all of relativism’s objections to Christianity. No one can honestly deny when they have been listened to. No one can deny when one has had an experience of beauty and love. And these experiences that cannot be denied are also inherently true, insofar as they reflect the truth of God’s love, as Francis described in the quotes above.

If we were to put Francis and Longenecker in dialogue with one another, I believe Francis would have some final advice to give to him. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he writes:

Ideas – conceptual elaborations – are at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis. Ideas disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action. ... We have politicians – and even religious leaders – who wonder why people do not understand and follow them, since their proposals are so clear and logical. Perhaps it is because they are stuck in the realm of pure ideas and end up reducing politics or faith to rhetoric. Others have left simplicity behind and have imported a rationality foreign to most people.

We are in the midst of a global spiritual war for the human heart. Rather than allow empty rhetoric, vapid philosophies, and ineffectual idealism to make the Church even more irrelevant—as some Church figures clearly want to do—now is the time to insist on a mature Christianity, where each person is truly enlivened by the Spirit through faith in Jesus. The guardrails are off, and the only option we have to help people persevere in holiness is to help nurture that personal relationship with Christ who speaks to us and reveals his plan for our lives. We will end up much better off for it. Benedict writes, “In this plan, he finds his truth, and through adherence to this truth he becomes free.”