



## Faith and Life Essay

### **Respect for Life, Moral Relativism, and Catholic Education**

Gabriel Marcella

Angela Smith

Carlisle, PA

September 2016

Moral relativism is the belief that there are no moral truths, that we therefore should be non-judgmental. This logical fallacy is offered as true individual freedom. But it undermines the fabric of society, widens the breach between rich and poor, and promotes division rather than community. It also engenders disrespect for human life. Catholics confront an emerging “dictatorship of relativism.” To combat it they must study their faith and strengthen their capacity for moral reasoning.

Saint Gabriel Respect Life

[www.stgabrielcarlisle.org](http://www.stgabrielcarlisle.org)

\*Luca Signorelli. *The Holy Family*. 1490. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

## **Respect for Life, Moral Relativism, and Catholic Education**

Gabriel Marcella

Angela Smith

St. Gabriel Respect Life Ministry

Saint Patrick Church

Carlisle, Pennsylvania

“We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Freedom and Choice**

What can do the greatest harm to our nation? The typical response might be terrorism, China, Iran, a resurgent Russia, climate change and environmental damage, a pandemic, or some combination. Most of these are external to our nation. At home there is a force that is weakening the fabric of society and strength of our nation. Much less obvious than foreign threats, it’s called relativism, the notion that truth is relative, not absolute. Americans take pride in being the most pluralistic, diverse, and tolerant society in the world. Our nation was founded by Europeans fleeing intolerance, oppression, and lack of opportunity. We enshrined freedom as the highest value in our society, though we fought a great Civil War in order to extend freedom to all citizens.

We are taught that being non-judgmental and tolerant is a virtue because we don’t want to impinge upon the freedom of others. Moreover, we recoil from limitations on our own freedom. In the tradition of settlers choosing their own lands and religion, we, too, crave freedom of choice. What are our criteria for choosing? If we accept relativism, then no choice is better than any other. Our only criteria are our desires. Our society elevates freedom of choice, the "good life" is often perceived as the life with the fewest restrictions on choosing. Yet while the libertine has the freedom to choose what he likes, he lacks the freedom to excel and to do good. If he chooses to dine on rich foods and drink to excess, his heart and liver are not free to avoid the consequences. If he chooses a dissolute

---

<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Homily,” Conclave to Elect the Pope, April 19, 2005.

life of hedonism, both his body and soul will grow haggard. In a society of relativists, an eye for an eye can leave everyone blind.

The most comprehensive form of freedom is the freedom of excellence.<sup>2</sup> An aspiring soccer player is not free to excel because he lacks the control to guide his limbs to do as he wishes. In order to excel, he needs to know how his limbs ought to move, and practice until those movements are routine. So, too, with the moral life: we must know what is good, and consistently do it, until the good becomes integrated within us. Freedom of choice is built into our nature, but it is not an end in itself. Its purpose is to equip us to choose what is good, thus developing the more liberating freedom of excellence. A society leavened by individuals who have achieved the freedom of excellence is knit together by civic friendship, a deliberate willing of the common good.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, relativism renders this unattainable by insisting that there is no absolute good for which we can mutually strive.

Some Catholics misunderstand true freedom. Pope John Paul II speaks to this in *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life):

This view of freedom leads to a serious distortion of life in society. If the promotion of the self is understood in terms of absolute autonomy, people inevitably reach the point of rejecting one another. Everyone else is considered an enemy from whom one has to defend oneself. . . . In this way, any reference to common values and to a truth absolutely binding on everyone is lost, and social life ventures onto the shifting sands of complete relativism. At that point, everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargaining: even the first of the fundamental rights, the right to life. (par.20)

## Relativism

Because of the uniqueness of the American historical experience we may be the most relativist society in the world. Relativism is not philosophy. It's the logical fallacy that because we disagree, there are

---

<sup>2</sup> John Cuddeback, "A Catholic Critique of False Freedom," Institute of Catholic Culture, <https://instituteofcatholicculture.org/talk/independence/>, July 7, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For further treatment of civic friendship, see Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 9:1; 1159 b.25, "Parallelism of friendship and justice: the state comprehends all lesser communities," where he states that "For in every community there is thought to be some form of justice, and friendship too...And the extent of their association is the extent of their friendship, as it is the extent to which justice exists between them." *Oxford World's Classics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 207.

no objective truths, and objective moral values. Those values are simply different or maybe odd; it's all relative to one's belief or culture.<sup>4</sup> Catholic writer Carl E. Olson states:

Relativism insists that morality, cultures, and beliefs are all of equal value, meaning, and worth. It asserts that what is true for one person might not be true for another, and each person can decide for himself what is true, good, and right. Popular expressions of relativism include comments such as, "This is true for me—and so I believe it" and "What's right for you might not be right for me."<sup>5</sup>

It is true that we must apply objective morality in varied life circumstances. A soldier must determine when to apply force against an adversary, how much force to apply, and under what conditions lethal force is appropriate. His primary moral problems differ from those of a doctor, a merchant, or a mother. Yet relativism goes beyond acknowledging that *situations* in which we apply moral principles differ, to state that the *principles themselves* differ from person to person. Relativism asserts itself in four forms: cultural, moral, situational, and cognitive. In cultural relativism all cultures are assumed to have equal value. Moral relativism proposes that goodness depends on what people say morality is at a particular time and place. Situational relativism argues that right or wrong depends entirely on the specific circumstances, not at all on objective morality. Cognitive relativism is the position that there is no absolute truth which the mind can grasp. The latter statement is, of course, self refuting.

### **Relativism and Life**

If we follow the illogic of relativism anything goes, individuals and cultures can uphold whatever values they wish. Thus, we should approve of child brides and other practices that we might find repugnant. We should not criticize a country's poor behavior on human rights because that country has a different definition of what constitutes human rights, a universal standard should not exist.<sup>6</sup> Abortion and assisted suicide would be perfectly acceptable. Someone else's pro-life views are unacceptable because I say so. They threaten my freedom to believe what I desire. One of America's foremost philosophers, Baylor University professor Francis Beckwith, asserts that pervasive relativism,

---

<sup>4</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, "Philosophical Problems with Moral Relativism," *CRLequip.org* (<http://www.equip.org/articles/philosophical-problems-with-moral-relativism/>), downloaded August 2, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Carl E. Olson, "Relativism 101: A Brief, Objective Guide," p. 1, 2005. ([http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2005/colson\\_relativism\\_may05.asp](http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2005/colson_relativism_may05.asp)), downloaded September 12, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> In fact *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, proclaimed in 1948, is a standard drafted by authors from distinct legal and cultural traditions around the globe.

despite its apparent openness and tolerance, is at the core of the pro-abortion fallacy.<sup>7</sup> In his very readable book he analyzes the logical fallacy. His principal points:

1. The unborn, from the moment of conception, is a full-fledged member of the human community.
2. It is morally wrong to kill any member of that community.
3. Disagreement between pro-life and pro-abortion does not justify accepting relativist thinking.
4. Absurd consequences follow from moral relativism. For example, Saint Teresa of Calcutta would be no better than Adolf Hitler because both pursued valid agendas.
5. Relativism is itself closed-minded and intolerant.
6. Relativism is judgmental, exclusivist, and partisan.
7. Tolerance of moral relativism condones barbarism.

Simply stated, relativism negates itself.

### **Faith in the Public Square**

In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville perceived the profound role of religious truth in securing freedom in our democratic society:

Men are therefore immeasurably interested in acquiring fixed ideas of God, of the soul, and of their common duties to their Creator and to their fellow-men; for doubt on these first principles would abandon all their actions to the impulse of chance, and would condemn them to live, to a certain extent, powerless and undisciplined...When the religion of a people is destroyed, doubt gets hold of the highest portions of the intellect, and half paralyzes all the rest of its powers. Every man accustoms himself to entertain none but confused and changing notions on the subjects most interesting to his fellow-creatures and himself. His opinions are ill-defended and easily abandoned: and, despairing of ever resolving by himself the hardest problems of the destiny of man, he ignobly submits to think no more about them. Such a condition cannot but enervate the soul, relax the springs of the will, and prepare a people for servitude.<sup>8</sup>

De Tocqueville issued this warning in 1840, but we have not heeded his concern. Pope Francis describes

society's misunderstanding of the role of religion:

---

<sup>7</sup> Beckwith, *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case Against Abortion Choice*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, "Of the Manner in Which Religion in the United States Avails Itself of Democratic Tendencies," *Democracy in America*, Volume II, 1840, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/816/816-h/816-h.htm>, accessed Sept. 16, 2016.

...there are those in our culture who portray this teaching as unjust, that is, opposed to basic human rights. Such claims usually follow from a form of moral relativism that is joined, not without inconsistency, to a belief in the absolute rights of individuals. In this view the Church is perceived as promoting a particular prejudice and as interfering with individual freedom.<sup>9</sup>

Compounding our challenge is the lamentable fact that some so-called Catholics in public life and universities are exponents of relativism, supporting “choice” and a “woman’s right,” and denying the scientific evidence that a zygote has all the attributes of a human being.<sup>10</sup> A Catholic senator votes 44% pro-life, thus he is both pro and against abortion. The Vice President, who calls himself a *de fide* Catholic, affirmed to the Jesuit *America Magazine* before the visit of Pope Francis to Philadelphia in 2015: “I’m prepared to accept that at the moment of conception there’s human life and being, but I’m not prepared to say that to other God-fearing, non-God-fearing people that have a different view.”<sup>11</sup> Too many Catholics are comfortable with and proud about holding two opposing values: “I’m against abortion, but respect a woman’s right to choose.” Such logic is akin to being for and against slavery. De Tocqueville observed:

One of the most ordinary weaknesses of the human intellect is to seek to reconcile contrary principles, and to purchase peace at the expense of logic. Thus there have ever been, and will ever be, men who, after having submitted some portion of their religious belief to the principle of authority, will seek to exempt several other parts of their faith from its influence, and to keep their minds floating at random between liberty and obedience.<sup>12</sup>

How can society survive such cognitive dissonance? De Tocqueville concluded that “without ideas held in common, there is no common action, and without common action, there may still be men, but there is no social body.”<sup>13</sup>

## Relativism and Society

---

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014, p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> Angela Smith, “The Human Person’s Beginning: The Biological Evidence,” *Saint Gabriel Respect Life*, accessed Sept. 18, 2016. <http://static1.squarespace.com/static/53402e8ee4b008f8c6d7f6de/t/57a5617cff7c50b56192801d/1470456190366/TheHumanPersonsBeginningTheBiologicalEvidenceV.6.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> “America Exclusive: Vice President Biden on Pope Francis, Faith and Public Life,” *America*, September 21, 2015. <http://papalvisit.americamedia.org/2015/09/21/biden-interview/>

<sup>12</sup> De Tocqueville, “Of the Progress of Roman Catholicism In the United States,” *Democracy in America, Volume II*, 1840, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/816/816-h/816-h.htm>, accessed Sept. 16, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> De Tocqueville, “Of the Principal Source of Belief Among Democratic Nation,” *Democracy in America, Volume II*, 1840, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/816/816-h/816-h.htm>, accessed Sept. 16, 2016.

Archbishop Chaput notes that we are tempted to “dislike real history, because the past, as it actually happened, places irritating limits on the present and future.”<sup>14</sup> We must resist this temptation and open ourselves to the truth of what has occurred in the past. History shows that relativism has been at the core of the major conflicts of the twentieth century, those caused by the doctrines of fascism and communism. Both “isms” snuffed out objective truth in the name of an exclusivist ideology promoted by intolerant dictatorship. Mussolini freely admitted this:

Everything I have said and done in these last years is relativism, by intuition. From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value, that all ideologies are mere fictions, the modern relativist infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology, and to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable. If relativism signifies contempt for fixed categories, and men who claim to be the bearers of an objective immortal truth, then there is nothing more relativistic than fascism.<sup>15</sup>

These “isms” brought catastrophe in the form of over 70 million people dead in World War II and a protracted Cold War.

Closer to home, the admonition to be non-judgmental about what causes our social and economic problems contributes to the development of two societies in America—the poor underclass and the 1% at the top of the heap. The cognitive and economic elite practice conservative morality and religiosity even as they preach a toxic non-judgmentalism which, when taken to heart by the rest of society, fractures families and social support networks. So states Catholic theologian and philosopher R. R. Reno:

Nonjudgmentalism breeds an inequality more profound and consequential than a growing divergence of income, splitting society into two realms, the functional and dysfunctional. In the former, governed by discipline and decency, basic social institutions such as marriage thrive, while in the latter the conditions of dignified lives are undermined. Our ongoing insistence on nonjudgmentalism in spite of the obvious harm it does to the poor and vulnerable—reveals the heartless underside of American society.<sup>16</sup>

### **Youth and Education**

Young people are particularly vulnerable to relativism. They are searching for identity, for success in interpersonal relationships, approval from peers, and belonging to a like-minded group. Peer group

---

<sup>14</sup> Chaput, p. 62

<sup>15</sup> Benito Mussolini, *Diuturna*, 1921. [civicsgeeks.blogspot.com/2008/09/mussolini-on-moral-relativism.html](http://civicsgeeks.blogspot.com/2008/09/mussolini-on-moral-relativism.html), accessed September 17, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> R. R. Reno, *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society*, Washington, D. C.: Regnery, 2016, p. 54.

pressure pulls them to go with the flow. Being non-judgmental is a virtue because expressing the difference between right and wrong is offensive. Moreover, some colleges and universities are citadels of relativism which reinforce non-judgmentalism. As the young prepare to assume adult responsibilities, they are keenly supportive of social justice. Relativism appeals to them because it seems benign and respectful, avoids confrontation, and appears to engender fairness and social harmony, though it actually does the opposite by promoting division.

What can we do to counteract the pull of relativism? Self identified Catholics numbered 81.6 million in the United States in 2015. There were 784,790 students in Catholic colleges and universities in 2014, and 1,915,836 in elementary and high schools in 2016. Add an estimated 80,000—100,000 in home schooling. Another cohort—youth and adult—receives instruction in religion at the parish level—an estimated 3.2 million. Newman Centers at non-Catholic colleges and universities also provide some level of education in the faith. The numbers tell us that Catholic education can have an impressive leavening impact on society. Parents and schools should impart a thorough understanding of our faith and the philosophical and scientific principles that underlie pro-life. The advice of Mary Ann Glendon, professor at Harvard Law School and former American Ambassador to the Holy See, is pertinent:

In contemporary society, if religious formation does not come up to the general level of secular education, we are going to run into trouble defending our beliefs — even to ourselves. We are going to feel helpless when we come up against the secularism and relativism that are so pervasive in our culture and in the university. We are going to be tongue-tied when our faith comes under unjust attack.<sup>17</sup>

### **Self Education**

We cannot teach what we do not know. We must know our faith. We must educate ourselves about our nation's history, western civilization and the role of Christianity, understand the constitutional guarantees of freedom, understand the strengths and weaknesses of our society, and know the Church documents on social justice and religious freedom. One of the best prescriptions against relativism is learning from the past in order to avoid the tyranny of "presentism," another manifestation of relativism. Thinkers of the past have much wisdom, the power of their ideas still

---

<sup>17</sup> Glendon, "Mary Ann Glendon on Today's University Students," *Catholic Online*, April 5, 2004. <http://www.catholic.org/featured/headline.php?ID=841>



influences. Moreover, understanding the patterns and events of history gives confidence and the clarifying lens of analogy through which we can contextualize current events. Above all, let us study logic and philosophy and apply them to the debate on faith and policy in the public square, and incorporate them into conversations with our children and grandchildren at home. A good way to start is by tapping the writings and audios of distinguished Catholic intellectuals like Beckwith, Peter Kreeft, and Chris Stefanik on these sites:

1. Beckwith, "Philosophical Problems with Moral Relativism,"  
<http://www.equip.org/articles/philosophical-problems-with-moral-relativism/>
2. Kreeft, "A Refutation of Moral Relativism:"  
[http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/05\\_relativism.htm](http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/05_relativism.htm)
3. Stefanick, "Relativism" (CD),  
<http://cart.dynamiccatholic.com/Relativism-by-Chris-Stefanick-p/1rel-cd.htm>

These works and others, on topics in science, philosophy, theology, youth, and the family, are linked at [www.stgabrielcarlisle.org](http://www.stgabrielcarlisle.org).

### **Civic Responsibility**

To help us apply these principles in the moral choices we must make as citizens in the voting booth, the American Catholic bishops publish the document "The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship." It is a splendid guide. It states:

The Church's obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society is a requirement of our faith, a part of the mission given to us by Jesus Christ. Faith helps us see more clearly the truth about human life and dignity that we also understand through human reason... In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. As Catholics, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group.

---

18

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/upload/Forming-Consciences-Faithful-Citizenship-bulletin-insert.pdf>

Political participation is one aspect of the comprehensive call to citizenship articulated by Archbishop Charles J. Chaput in *Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Life*: "the church should be a mustard seed in society, transforming--not by coercion but by active witness--every fiber of a nation's political, economic, and social life."<sup>19</sup> Finally, we must restore moral reasoning—the ability to determine right from wrong-- to the highest place in our own education. This requires mastery of logic, philosophy, and Catholic teaching.<sup>20</sup> Let us pursue our freedom to achieve excellence within ourselves, our families, and our society, thus heeding the call to be leaven in all of these realms.

---

### Points for Discussion

1. What is relativism?
2. What are some examples? How is it expressed?
3. How does relativism affect morality?
4. How does it affect public policy?
5. How does it affect society?
6. How does it affect the Church?
7. How does religious belief safeguard our democracy?
8. How can we combat relativism?
9. What kind of intellectual preparation is needed?
10. How can our educational institutions do better?
11. How can parents and grandparents be prepared to teach youth, formally and informally?

---

<sup>19</sup> Chaput, *Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Public Life*, New York: Doubleday, 2006, p. 54.

<sup>20</sup> Catholic Distance University provides a rich variety of courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels, including: church history, moral theology, philosophy for theology, Catholic social teachings, Catholicism and modern American culture. <https://www.cdu.edu/catalog>

<sup>21</sup> We wish to thank John Smith for his indispensable assistance in graphic design of the cover of this essay and the Saint Gabriel website, [www.stgabrielcarlisle.org](http://www.stgabrielcarlisle.org).