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RESISTING RELATIVISM: TRUTH, LIBERTY, AND HUMAN DIGNITY

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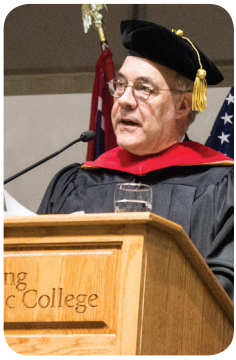

Mr. and Mrs. Schneider lived across an air vent roof access from my apartment, both of our apartments being on Coney Island Avenue in Brooklyn, New York. It was a very small apartment, ours and theirs. The apartments mirrored each other, so that I could look from our kitchen window directly into their kitchen window. One bright, pleasant spring day—a day very much like this one—when our mutual windows were open, Mrs. Schneider began preparing some of the most luscious pastries on earth: a flaky central European pastry called rugelach. There was Mrs. Schneider rolling out the dough, putting in the walnuts and the sugar and the cinnamon, rolling them up, putting them onto a cookie sheet and slipping them into her green Wedgwood oven. Mrs. Schneider was wearing a flowered, short-sleeved dress.

At about five years old, I found myself mesmerized by the process, as I peered out from my kitchen window sill. Pretty soon the smells wafted across into my window. Mrs. Schneider, who heretofore had not looked at me once, finally, as the last tray was being pulled out of the oven, looked me directly in the eyes and said, "You come. I'll give you to eat." So I scampered over the windowsill and made my way across to hers and held out my greedy little hands over which she laid a napkin and proceeded to place the rugelach. It was as she was doing this that I noticed there were a series of blue numbers tattooed on Mrs. Schneider's forearm. At five years old, I had no comprehension at all of the meaning or significance of those numbers. And to be very frank, at the time I was more preoccupied with the warm rugelach that beckoned me. I took my treasures into my kitchen and immediately hid them from my siblings. When my mom

came in, I told her Mrs. Schneider had given me the rugelach, and I asked her why Mrs. Schneider would have numbers on her arm.

That was perhaps my first lesson in . . . in what shall we call it? . . . political philosophy? Moral philosophy? Anthropology? My mother said that Mr. and Mrs. Schneider had come for safety to the United States and that they had lived under a horrible government that had killed their family. They came to the U.S. for refuge. That was the first time I knew what a refugee was. Prior to that, I thought that refugees were just another nationality. When I heard my father remark that "some refugees are moving into the neighborhood," I just thought it meant people from a country called "Refuge."

At five years old, I was astounded and aghast that human beings could treat other human beings like this. My mother asked what kinds of movies I watched on TV on Saturday mornings. "Westerns," I said. "What do the cowboys do with the calves they capture?" "They tie them up and brand them," I said. She then asked, "Why do they do that?" I said, "So everyone knows who owns the calf." She explained that that was the way people treated Mr. and Mrs. Schneider. That simple explanation revealed the foundation of natural law to me.

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In the 8th Psalm, the psalmist asks a question that lingers in each human heart: "What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou visitest him?" Who are we? Why are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? Why does evil exist in the world?

These are the perennial questions that occupy the human heart without regard to our particular religious affiliation. We find these questions reverberating down through the millennia in Confucius, Lao Tse, the Buddha, and Homer; we find these questions naturally embedded in the human heart. And how you answer these questions will determine the course of the rest of your life. It will determine the kind of society that

you will choose to build, the kind of civilization that you will put your energy into constructing.

If you believe the human person is simply the accidental and random combination of only material parts, formed by no particular rationality or purpose, you will tend to treat others according to that assumption, and build institutions on that assumption. You will treat others as mere material objects—objects very often to be manipulated for your own utility, for your own convenience and benefit—always thus treated, of course, with the best of intentions. But if you believe that each and every human being whom you encounter is, as C.S. Lewis says, "either an eternal splendor or an everlasting horror," an immortal being with an origin deeper than this world and a destiny beyond our own society and all of its contructs, then you will tend to treat people in a far more sober-minded, indeed a reverential manner, recognizing in others (again Lewis) that "next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses." As you approach them, you will encounter the sacred, a presence that you will recognize as a result of your ability to recognize the sacred in yourself.

Above the portal at the temple in Delphi is inscribed the admonition "Know Thyself." Who are you? That is the first question. The process that you have just engaged in these last few years, the process of education and formation, is predicated on an assumption that is not shared by everyone and that will not be shared in some of the contexts into which you are about to proceed in the coming years. It is an idea that presumes that your minds are suitable and capable and designed to pursue the truth of things. Now that seems almost axiomatic, doesn't it? What else do we do with our minds except attempt to apprehend the truth of a thing, whether it's a piece of literature, an experiment, a work of art, a piece of music, or a good meal? We inquire because we are knowing beings, and not to inquire is to live a life not worth living. We seek to know the truth of things. We have the capacity to self-reflect—that is, not just to reflect on things outside of us, but to reflect upon ourselves as well—which makes us unique in all of creation. Unlike animals, we can reflect upon our reflections.

This process that you have just undergone is also designed to inoculate you; to inoculate you against a rampant, powerful, seductive alternative to itself: evasion. You will encounter it. You are unable to avoid it. I speak here of a moral relativism. It is an epistemological agnosticism that denies the capacity of the human mind to know the truth. This concept that presents itself as the very apex of tolerance is really incoherent. It is self-contradictory, and because it is, it is dangerous. It descends into what Pope Benedict once called a dictatorship of relativism. It is seductive because it invites us to have the posture of knowledge without the obligation that truth imposes on us. It is tempting because it makes no arduous personal demands of us because, after all, everything is relative, so that if you just don't understand something well enough, you can justify anything. After all, according to this line of reasoning, evil doesn't really exist. Evil is simply the name that we give to things we don't understand.

The question that was posed by Pilate to Jesus 2000 years ago was presented, I imagine, with a cynical sneer: "What is truth?" What is truth? Actually it was an evasive maneuver to avoid the responsibility for the judgment that he was about to make. There are modern Pilates today, especially those who occupy the numerous endowed chairs in our prestigious universities, who ask the same questions with the same cynicism. The question is posed, not to seek an answer, which is what you usually do when you ask a question, but it is posed because they don't believe there *are* ultimate answers to fundamental questions. The posing of the question is merely to evade the responsibility that an authoritative answer would impose upon the human heart.

Our tradition, the tradition of Western civilization, is based upon a particular anthropology that one finds in the Old and New Testaments. It is called the Judeo-Christian tradition, and rightly so. And this civilization which is predicated on the assumptions we find in the Scriptures has enabled our world to see the construction of the most free and, properly understood, the most liberal society and prosperous civilization that the world has ever known. We live in the midst of this and are its beneficiaries, and in fact, we live on the higher end of it; and yet these ideas which form the pillar of this prosperity, of liberty, of this high anthro-

pology, if you will, are under great threat. They are threatened because the kind of anthropological vision that I have just painted for you challenges moral relativism.

Our tradition begins with an anthropology that sees human life as sacred; each individual human life is sacred, and human beings possess an inherent right to keep their lives. This is not because a society or government or a set of laws has granted them this right, but because, by the very nature of the case, humans possess this right themselves. It is what the Declaration of Independence called a "self-evident" truth. It needs no proof because were you able to disprove it, you would also disprove the person who is making the assertion that it is untrue. This anthropology, in turn, enables us to understand that the human person possesses not only the right to his life but also the right to what he produces in the course of his life—in the exercise of his intelligence. That is to say, private property in this tradition is also seen as sacred because of its intimate connection to man. Hence the commandment "Thou shalt not steal." Finally, as a result of believing in the dignity of the human person in this right to his life and in the right to his property, we also believe in the right to engage in contracts with others. The right of contracts and the necessity of courts to enforce and adjudicate disputes among people peacefully, all of these things—initially abstract ideas—come to form a very concrete set of institutions that protect and prosper the human family. All these ideas stem from certain basic assumptions which you will have to confront and will see under brutal attack.

To make a distinction, as we have in our tradition, between authority and power is likewise one aspect of this inheritance. Think of how important it is to make a distinction between authority and power, yet we almost use those words interchangeably. The sociologist Robert Nisbet, from whom I'm drawing this distinction, really helps us to see how critical it is. Authority and power, he says, are both forms of constraint. They constrain our activity. But authority is an internal form of constraint, whereas power is external. Authority is the acquiescence to mores and traditions; to institutions; and to religious ideas that we ourselves believe in, that we adopt and hold, and to which we acquiesce. Power is external to us. Its essential

nature is that it can coerce us—it can force our actions or conscribe our liberty. Both of these are forms of constraint. But woe to that society that depends too much on power and not enough on authority—not enough on the traditions which people hold, and by an agreed consensus, freely restrict their behavior out of conformity to a law or to a custom or to a habit. Woe to that society that eviscerates tradition and allows power to accrue and to grow, for under such systems we have the kind of regimes that give us millions upon millions of Mr. and Mrs. Schneiders.

As you go forth, beware of the seductive calls to a false tolerance. You will hear that if you hold and assert truths that run against the political cognoscenti in our societies, your beliefs are politically incorrect, and that makes you intolerant! The most horrible accusation anyone can be accused of in the modern context, the one that so many dread hearing, is that they are "intolerant."

Don't believe it! It's a lie! It's a smokescreen! Let Toto pull aside the drapes so you can see the little man operating the make-believe machinery. True tolerance, my friends, necessitates a belief in the truth of things. You are not tolerant when you have to accept or endorse things with which you don't agree. It is the tolerance of them, the putting up with such things, that makes you tolerant. Those who cried for tolerance in a previous generation are today the very ones who are intolerant if you do not agree with them! Don't buy into a false notion of tolerance that is really a backdoor way of getting moral relativism into the mix.

As you go forth, beware of such seductive calls to compromise your confidence in your mind's ability to apprehend the truth and in your will's ability to live the truth. This is the core of the moral life—that you have free will and that you can choose to live the truth even though sometimes it may be difficult, or may even cost you your life. Do not settle for mediocrity in your moral lives or in your professional engagements. Have the same respect for others that you know you have the right to yourself. Do not succumb to the ideologies that would seek to reduce liberty to license or to expand that sphere of power, reducing human beings to objects and slaves. I chose Lord Acton as an of icon for the Institute that I was honored twen-

ty-seven years ago to found with my colleague and friend Kris Mauren. We chose that name because Acton was the historian of human liberty. He sought the construction of a society that was both free and virtuous because he understood that virtue was the only glue that could keep together a society. As I close these remarks, I want to leave with you two considerations from Lord Acton for you to think about in the days ahead.

Lord Acton once made the observation that "Liberty is the delicate fruit of a mature civilization." You are, ladies and gentlemen, the inheritors of a great and august legacy. The fact is that you did not invent this or create it, but you are merely its inheritors—inheritors with an obligation to preserve and hand on this legacy. You and I are the descendants of those who have in some cases fought to defend freedom.

Acton offers us another keen insight when he writes, "That liberty of which we speak is not the freedom to do what you want but the liberty to do what you ought."

In the great liberty this country guarantees us by its Constitution, we must understand that our freedom can only be exercised responsibly when it is in conjunction with the truth of who we are. For only in that way can we guarantee the rights of all people—the vulnerable, the poor, the unborn, the ignorant, the marginalized, and the dejected. I pray that you will take for yourselves a moral orientation to the liberty that you have the privilege to live.

Thank you.

Fr. Robert Sirico received his Master of Divinity degree from the Catholic University of America following undergraduate study at the University of Southern California and the University of London. During his studies and early ministry, he experienced a growing concern over the lack of training religious studies students receive in fundamental economic principles, and he co-founded the Acton Institute with Kris Alan Mauren in 1990. As its president, Fr. Sirico lectures at colleges, universities, and business organizations throughout the U.S. and abroad. His writings on religious, political, economic, and social matters are published in a variety of journals, including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, the *London Financial Times*, the *Washington Times*, the *Detroit News*, and *National Review*. An audio version of this talk can be found at the College's website at www.wyomingcatholic.org/Audio.