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Freedom in an Age of Secularism

An Interview with Russell D. Moore

A Journal of Religion, Economics, and Culture

Editor's Note



When it comes to our first freedom, perhaps nobody is more engaged in the public square right now than Russell Moore. He is President of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, a theologian, and a dynamic preacher. I knew of Moore long before he was a public figure. We had both worked for the same U.S. Congressman, but at different times. I heard the Congressman and other staffers praise Moore's work, integrity, and his commitment to his faith on many occasions. I was glad to finally connect with him for the purpose of this interview in this issue.

Moore discusses the state of religious liberty today and delves into why Baptists offer a unique insight on this issue

because of their own persecution in American history. He also touches on the importance of ecumenical cooperation for religious liberty, an area where he has emerged as a leader.

Pope Francis has rightfully taken some criticism on his economic views but in "Shades of Solzhenitsyn," Kevin Duffy offers some high praise for the pontiff in regards to his teachings on the human person and materialism. The author's main point is that both Solzhenitsyn and Francis offer a deep understanding of the problems that plague Western society and are committed to deeper truths. We live in a world that is starved and isolated from morality and I think readers will find that this piece is a valuable contribution and the comparison of these two great figures has merit.

Acton's Dylan Pahman reviews *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* by well-known Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann. I offer a review of *Ex-tortion: How Politicians Extract Your Money, Buy Votes, and Line Their Own Pockets* by Peter Schweizer. The book is a follow-up to Schweizer's *Throw Them All Out*,

which garnered a lot of attention, much to the disdain of our entrenched political class in Washington D.C. Schweizer was interviewed in the Winter 2013 issue of *Religion & Liberty*.

"Christian Environmentalism and Temptation of Faux Asceticism" is an essay adapted from the new Acton monograph *Creation and the Heart of Man: An Orthodox Christian Perspective on Environmentalism* by Fr. Michael Butler and Andrew Morriss.

The "In the Liberal Tradition" figure is Richard Baxter, an English Puritan leader. Max Weber declared that Baxter was the embodiment of the Protestant work ethic. Baxter was one of the most prolific theological writers of the 17th Century.

Acton's executive director Kris Mauren discusses an important subject about government valuing the role of charities and non-profits. Acton is defending its application for a Grand Rapids property tax exemption and Mauren offers important insight on pressure from local governments.

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Cover Photo: Carol Anderson of Williamsburg, Va., holds a cross outside the Supreme Court in Washington, Thursday, June 28, 2012, after the court's ruling on health care. Photographer: Evan Vucci. Associated Press.

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Freedom in an Age of Secularism

An Interview with Russell D. Moore

Russell D. Moore serves as the eighth president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, the moral and public policy agency of the nation's largest Protestant denomination. Prior to his election to this role in 2013, Moore served as provost and dean of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, where he also taught as professor of theology and ethics. A widely-sought cultural commentator, Moore has been recognized by a number of influential organizations. The Wall Street Journal has called him "vigorous, cheerful, and fiercely articulate" while The Gospel Coalition has referred to him "one of the most astute ethicists in contemporary evangelicalism." An ordained minister, Dr. Moore has served as a pastor for a number of Southern Baptist churches—most recently serving as preaching pastor at Highview Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky. from 2008-2012. A native Mississippian, he and his wife Maria are the parents of five boys. He recently spoke with managing editor Ray Nothstine.

R&L: As secularism and threats to religious liberty increase, do you feel like greater persecution against Christians is inevitable in this country?

Russell Moore: I do think that Christianity is going to become more marginalized in this country. That's not something that I am panicked about, but it's something that I'm concerned about. I think we can already see that with the way that the Christian sexual ethic, for instance, is seen as a threat to American democracy for a large segment of the population.

Baptists were often on the receiving end of religious persecution in early American history. What can we learn from that experience and why is it relevant today?

One of the contributions that the Baptists have made to the larger body of Christ and to the larger civil society is the affirmation of soul freedom, meaning the deeper kind of responsible freedom that grows from unity with God, and religious liberty. And I think there are several lessons that we can draw from Baptist persecution in England and in the American Colonies and their advocacy for religious liberty. One of those things is that government would often want to say to the Baptists, "What we're insisting is not that big of a deal." So, for instance, in the state of Virginia, licensing preachers to preach the gospel, the government would say, "This isn't that much money. It isn't that much bureaucracy to apply for a license to preach." But the Baptists said, "This isn't simply a matter of how much money is required or how much paperwork is required. It's a matter of who has the authority to demand that." And the government doesn't have the authority to demand a license to preach the gospel. And so early Baptists, like John Leland and Isaac Backus and Jeremiah Moore and others were insistent that the issue isn't simply the penalty itself. It's the right to hand down the penalty.

I think the other lesson we can learn is the fact that the early Baptists were not willing to trust the politicians. Even in the formation of the Constitution, the politicians

were saying, "Of course, we're going to protect religious liberty. That's implicit in the text of the Constitution." And John Leland and others said, "We won't support



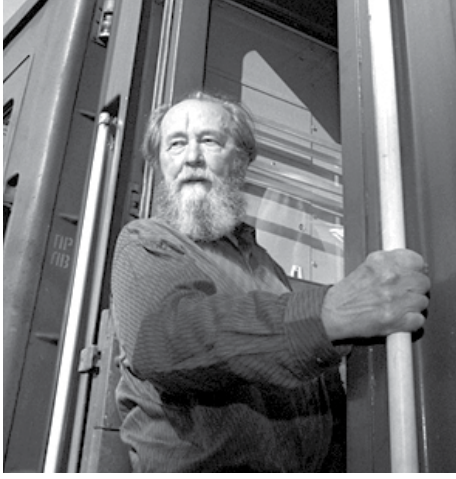
People protest National Healthcare Law.

© OlegAlbinsky. Image from www.istockphoto.com

ratification of the Constitution if it's not written down." Some of the politicians that the early American Baptists were dealing with are literally of Mount Rushmore stature. And they still were not willing simply to trust the word of the politicians.

I think that's something that we have seen in recent days, all the strands of this taking place with, for instance, the HHS mandate. The Obama Administration says, "This isn't that much of a burden for

continued on pg 12



Shades of Solzhenitsyn

By Kevin Duffy

Thirty-five years ago, a towering intellectual and moral figure drew worldwide attention by criticizing materialism and wealth-obsession in the Western world. The Nobel Laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn was alternately applauded and condemned (though mostly the latter) for his 1978 Commencement Address at Harvard University, in which he bluntly expressed profound disapproval of the prevailing culture in the United States and Europe, noting that “a decline in courage may be the most striking feature that an outside observer notices in the West today.”

More recently, another well-known figure of great moral stature, Pope Francis, sounded the very same message in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. While Francis also gained widespread attention, the vast majority of it seemed to be drawn by his brief (and also variously celebrated or scorned) comments on economics and wealth distribution, rather than his overarching message that so strikingly resembled that of Solzhenitsyn three decades ago. This is unfortunate, as the observations that the two men shared are profound and important beyond measure, addressing not merely the shallow political arguments of their respective moments, but the very nature and purpose of the free and virtuous life.

Their common message, in its most basic form, is that the prevailing culture of the modern world has become disconnected from its moral and spiritual heritage, becoming infatuated instead with the

shallow and transitory satisfactions of material wealth and self-gratification. Many others, from Alexis de Tocqueville to Martin Luther King Jr., have articulated the same concern. But the words of Francis and Solzhenitsyn are notable for both their passionate eloquence and their striking similarity.

As Solzhenitsyn had it: “everything beyond physical well-being and the accu-

“More than just a common recognition of this problem, the Russian dissident and the Argentine cleric shared the belief that it was rooted in a subjective view of truth and meaning.”

mulation of material goods...were left outside the area of attention...as if human life did not have any higher meaning.” Francis concurred: “in the prevailing culture, priority is given to the outward, the immediate, the visible, the quick, the superficial and the provisional. What is real gives way to appearances.” Likewise, they agreed that such selfishness leaves humanity ultimately unfulfilled. Francis wrote that “the great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by con-

sumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience.” Solzhenitsyn had announced that “the constant desire to have still more things...and the struggle to this end imprint many Western faces with worry and even depression,” and that “society has turned out to have scarce defense against the abyss of human decadence.”

More than just a common recognition of this problem, the Russian dissident and the Argentine cleric shared the belief that it was rooted in a subjective view of truth and meaning. Where Solzhenitsyn noted the “calamity of an autonomous, irreligious humanistic consciousness [that] has made man the measure of all things on earth — imperfect man, who is never free of pride, self-interest, envy, vanity, and dozens of other defects,” Francis called readers to “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.” Both, in turn, cited a specific loss of respect for Christianity and its traditions: “we have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility” said Solzhenitsyn, adding that “a total emancipation occurred from the moral heritage of Christian centuries with their great reserves of mercy and sacrifice.” Francis agreed: “the

process of secularization tends to reduce the faith and the Church to the sphere of the private and personal. Furthermore, by completely rejecting the transcendent, it has produced a growing deterioration of ethics, a weakening of the sense of personal and collective sin, and a steady increase in relativism. These have led to a general sense of disorientation.”

Even where Francis famously called for a government role—he wrote of “states, charged with vigilance for the common good” and “the responsibility of the state to safeguard and promote the common good of society...a fundamental role... which cannot be delegated”—he did so with great qualification and caution. “Based on the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity...[the government’s] role, at present, calls for profound social humility.” he wrote, going on to say that “[the Church] proposes in a clear way the fundamental values of human life and convictions which *can then* find expression in political activity” (italics added). Consistent with the rest of his message, then, the Pope’s suggestion about the government’s role is that it must, at all times, be informed by a genuine cultural shift in priorities (not, in fact, that it should be *the* agent of bringing about that shift).

While one may disagree with the shared religious convictions of Francis and Solzhenitsyn, their call for a renewed embrace of a common morality is inarguably appealing. Their life stories, moreover, lend weight to their words: Francis’ fight against selfishness and indifference is rooted in a lifetime of service to the poor; Solzhenitsyn’s views were forged in the

prisons of an empire where caring and thinking actively was strictly forbidden, and confirmed in a free world where such caring struck many as just too inconvenient. The differences in those experiences are telling as well: where a coercive state—one seeking to exercise complete control over every aspect of life—had brutally punished the writer, a permissive culture that expected no communal action or sacrifice had left so many of the priest’s flock forgotten. That these similar worldviews were drawn from such different experiences is instructive for all of us today; indeed, that fact points us to the unavoidable truth that our answers are to be found neither through the state nor through the simple pursuit of our own self-satisfactions. We are left with the inevitable conclu-

gives it meaning, beauty and attractiveness.” Indeed, if the Apostle Thomas would not believe the risen Christ Himself without the evidence of His wounds, how then can contemporary Christians expect to be understood or listened to by others, without showing any evidence of their own sacrifices? While Francis thus contemplated a life of struggle, Solzhenitsyn contemplated each life’s inevitable end: “If...man were born only to be happy, he would not be born to die. Since his body is doomed to death, his task on earth evidently must be more spiritual... not the search for the best ways to obtain material goods...[but] the fulfillment of a permanent, earnest duty...to leave life a better human being than one started it.” The eloquence of both men is compelling, and all the more so for this fact: amidst



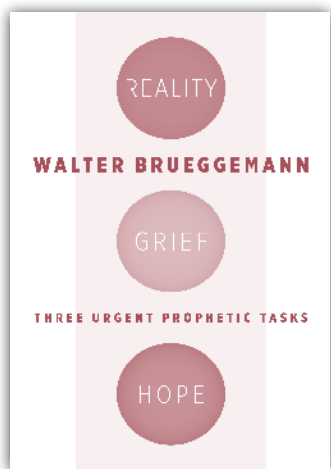
Pope Francis © neneos. Image from www.istockphoto.com

sion that it is only through the moral behavior of free people that we can truly experience individual and collective fulfillment and progress.

For Pope Francis, this leads to a call for action: “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets;” “we need to be realistic and not assume that our audience...is capable of relating what we say to the very heart of the Gospel which

pain, suffering, and despair, whether in the slums of Buenos Aires or the gulags of the Soviet Union, there have always been those who find meaning and strength, those who emerge to remind us not only of the blessings, but also the obligations, of our freedom and privilege.

Kevin Duffy is a member of the Parish Council at the Roman Catholic Cathedral of St. Matthew in Washington D.C.



The Perils of Political Ideology

By Dylan Pahman

Review of *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* by Walter Brueggemann (Eerdmans, 2014) 179 pages; \$15.00.

In *Reality, Grief, Hope*, renowned biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann proposes that, *mutatis mutandis*, “the crisis of 9/11 amounted to [the] same kind of dislocation in our society as did the destruction of Jerusalem in that ancient society.” He continues, “The impact of 9/11, along with the loss of life, was an important turn in societal ideology. We have been forced to face new waves of vulnerability. The force of that fresh awareness is evident in the various scrambles for security that have ensued since that event.” However, how he fleshes out this analogy, following the headings of “Reality amid Ideology” (chapter 2), “Grief amid Denial” (chapter 3), and “Hope amid Despair” (chapter 4), raised serious concerns in my reading of the book. That said, his practical recommendation in chapter 5, “Living amid Empire as Neighborhood,” took a refreshing turn for the better that deserves its due as well.

While I approached the book slightly skeptical of its contemporary analysis, imagine my shock to discover that the book begins with an explicitly Marxist reading of the Old Testament! Of course, acknowledging that Marx has something insightful to say with regards to ideology as “false consciousness” does not, therefore, make one’s interpretation Marxist. Yet it quickly becomes clear that Brueggemann takes far more from Marx than this one definition.

For Brueggemann, Solomon’s temple was a bold coopting of the conditional covenant religion of Sinai in favor of national exceptionalism, emphasizing an unending kingship and appealing to the Lord’s “steadfast love and faithfulness” as an opiate for the peasant communities oppressed by Jerusalem’s “urban elite.” Under this reading, all the “Songs of Zion” in the Psalms become propaganda pieces: “The enhancement of ... centralized and legitimated authority is advanced by the ‘Songs of Zion’ that celebrate the wonder of the temple.” By contrast, the Old Testament prophets speak out of solidarity with the peasant proletariat of ancient Israel. In the face of the dominant ideology that uses the rhetoric of “steadfast love and faithfulness” in order “to bespeak divine reliability for the status quo,” the prophets answer with “justice and righteousness,” which to Brueggemann is “a word pair that concerns economic justice and neighborly solidarity.”

Brueggemann is right that the monarchies of Israel and Judah often turned exploitative toward the poor, and the prophets do boldly denounce it. However, by reading this so strongly into Solomon’s reign, Brueggemann begs the question in favor of a myopic reading in which all patriotism becomes nationalism. Thus, he cannot allow for a positive reading of the Songs of Zion, a point that breaks down when he tries to address the inconvenient fact that many passages (including Psalm 89) closely pair the Lord’s “steadfast love and faithfulness” with “justice and righteousness.”

How does Brueggemann explain this? “Such a convergence of terms shows the way in which dominant ideology could preempt other claims and submit them to the needs and horizon of that urban enterprise.” Rather than a counterexample that would require him to rethink his thesis, he instead bends the meaning of the text by reading into it a dubious motive.

When he transitions to the present, then, Brueggemann’s analysis becomes predictable and, while sometimes true, continues to be counterfactual. Take, for example, his claim that American exceptionalism is fueled, even today, by a “racist component.” After mentioning prejudice toward Middle Eastern Muslims, he writes, “And of course, that racism is closer to home, so that ‘real Americans,’ unlike others among us including the President, are not really American.” This, however, does not square well with his central claim that “U.S. society is deeply committed ... to an ideology of exceptionalism.” How, I would ask, can this be the *dominant* ideology of our nation today when president Obama was easily elected and re-elected? No doubt many America-loving conservatives were just as put off by Donald Trump’s “birther” crusade as Brueggemann. That is not to say that racism no longer exists or that American exceptionalism cannot be taken to harmful extremes, but it is to say that Brueggemann’s chapter on reality contains far too much analysis, both biblical and contemporary, that would better be described as fantasy.

While Brueggemann draws heavily on the

Double-Edged Sword: *The Power of the Word*

scholarship of others, he unfortunately consults few actual economists to help explain the nature of what he sees to be our oppressive political economy. He rightly criticizes cronyism and corruption, but his attribution of these to a “market ideology” is completely backwards—they are the fruit of profoundly anti-competitive economic policy.

One possible corrective to this analytical problem is Walter Eucken’s *This Unsuccessful Age*, in which he demonstrates that the failures of twentieth-century *laissez faire* in Germany and the policies of regulation and nationalization implemented to correct its ills grew from actually favoring freedom of contract to the detriment of freedom of competition. Thankfully, we are a far cry from Nazi Germany—I would caution against Brueggemann’s general apocalypticism—but those disconcerting trends today that are actually grounded in reality suggest that Eucken and economists like him would be more helpful conversation partners than many that Brueggemann consults, assuming he himself prefers reality to his own ideology.

Nevertheless, just when I expected a Marxist call for revolution or a softer-left call for more legislation, Brueggemann surprised me again, concluding with a call to renewed, authentic neighborliness. While he acknowledges a role for activism, he emphasizes far more strongly the subsidiary role of communities and churches. “The church and its pastors,” he writes, “have the task of making the case for this narrative of neighborly participation by talk and walk, by face-to-face *generosity*, by daily *hospitality*, and by incredible *forgiveness*.” For him, this counters a prevalent narrative of empire, but even if I would quibble with whether or to what extent that is the case, I can join his call for a strengthening of civil and religious society. The more that people address the problems of the marginalized in their own communities themselves, the more they will be able to say to the state, “No thanks, we don’t need you.” And that, to me, is something for which we all should hope.

Acts 2:42

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

If you asked most church leaders what is the ideal picture of the church, they would probably point you to the second chapter of Acts. It is a description of the most ancient Christian church whose witness to truth endures. In an age where many people do and behave as they wish, it is comforting to be tied to the teachings of those who witnessed and learned from the Lord Jesus Christ. While the apostles were largely simple people, not learned or notably scholarly, their wisdom was divinely inspired and rooted in the incarnate testimony.

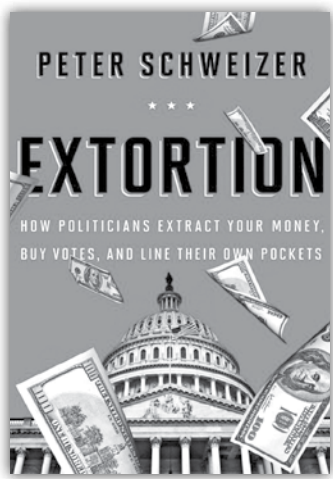
Despite the rising hostility to the faith within our own culture, theologian Thomas C. Oden reminds us, “Christianity has seen too many ‘modern eras’ to be *cowed* by this one.” Even as the culture around us erodes there will be a hunger for wisdom and knowledge. The brokenness of the world longs for it.

For the faithful churches and the people that gather there, it’s essential to be grounded in the transforming power of prayer. It’s probably safe to say that many churches lack lively prayer ministries and take advantage of corporate prayer. This hinders spiritual vitality, unity, and the entire ministry of the church.

If we simply look around us we can see that our world is in desperate need of prayer first and foremost. If this is something that is lacking in our houses of worship, it gives us a good opportunity to step up and set an example. It is perplexing when professing Christians make excuses when drifting away from corporate worship, because fellowship among believers is really just a picture or rehearsal of not only what we were created for, but what we will be doing for eternity. We are made for worship and relationship with the Triune God.

In the earliest Christian church, many were rapidly being brought to Christ. It was so because the leaders and assembled operated together with the power of the Spirit. Too often, because we have compartmentalized so much of our lives, we attend church as though we are an individual churchgoer or only an observer of the service. We owe our whole lives to the truth of God’s Word for us. A Word made man that was broken and shattered for our own sake and our future destiny.

After Peter’s sermon in Acts 2, the text above says the believers were “devoted” to wise instruction and guidance. Why were they so devoted? They had supreme confidence in the power of Jesus Christ to transform their life and carry them into the next.



How our Permanent Political Class Resembles Organized Crime

Review by Ray Nothstine

Review of *Extortion: How Politicians Extract Your Money, Buy Votes, and Line Their Own Pockets* by Peter Schweizer. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013) 256 pages; \$27.00.

If you want to understand how our federal government operates, you might learn more by studying the Mafia instead of civics. In *Extortion*, Peter Schweizer offers examples and evidence of how the permanent political class is run like an organized crime ring. Shake-downs, protection money, and political slush funds for private use are not only legal, but it's a thriving racket. And it's the sellers of influence who are the biggest benefactors, more so than those trying to buy influence.

The common consensus on political corruption: If outside influence and money is limited, the system will change for the better. Our politicians will in turn be purer and in a better position to represent the will of the people over moneyed interests. Opponents of the recent Supreme Court decision lifting the ban on limits for certain campaign contributions lament that it will only exacerbate political corruption. Schweizer turns the argument on its head, clearly pointing out that it's Washington that has mastered the art of corporate shake-down, and politicians even schedule votes by their ability to increase the level of extortion through legislative threat. CEOs have expressed frustration at the system saying even by infusing massive amounts of cash into both political parties, the problems aren't fixed. The only winners are those soliciting the funds, the permanent

political class. The late economist Peter Aranson agreed, "The real market for contributions is one of 'extortion' by those who hold a monopoly on the use of coercion – the officeholders." Schweizer simply states, "The assumption is that we need to protect politicians from outside influences. But how about protecting ourselves from the politicians?"

Schweizer explains how current Speaker of the House John Boehner is master of the "toll booth" tactic. The speaker or committee leaders purposefully use this method to delay votes on the House floor for the sole purpose of soliciting funds. But paying the "toll" doesn't just mean cutting a check; it can include the understanding of hiring former congressional staffers and friends. Laws are often so complex that the entire practice of hiring these staffers is a financial bonanza for those who wrote the regulations. If they are the only ones who understand it, corporations and Wall Street will pay top dollar to remain compliant.

Political disputes are often choreographed by Congressional members for the sole purpose of maximizing contributions. "Double-milking" is a common practice too, if there is interest on multiple sides; members can milk funds from multiple sources. All that needs to be done is to keep quiet about where you stand on the bill. "No matter who wins the math, everyone gets paid," adds Schweizer.

Even when ethics reforms are put in place

it has little impact on the political class -- they just rewrite new laws to their advantage. Change parties in power in hopes of relief from more government? Schweizer explains the falsehood in the notion:

The rampant extortion in Washington explains why government continues to grow, regardless of who is in power. And it also explains why government is getting meaner. It's more lucrative for the permanent political class that way. Just as the Mafia likes to expand its turf to seek more targets for extortion, an expanding government increases the number of targets for a shakedown. And the meaner government gets, the more often threats of extortion are successful.

Those looking to reform the system may get frustrated by how difficult it is to change Washington. "Those who wonder why the American tax code is so complex, convoluted, and constantly changing fail to appreciate what a wonderful tool for extortion it is," declares Schweizer.

Some Political Action Committees can be liquidated into personal cash once taxes are paid on them. Congressmen can place their family on the PAC payroll, providing relatives with a huge salary. Members can make their spouse the treasurer of their PAC and give them a salary of over \$100,000. Congressman Charlie Rangel paid his son \$79,560 to make a website for the National Leadership PAC. The site was slapped together in a few hours but wasn't

functional. “One web designer said the website was so bad that the fee should not have been more than \$100,” explained Schweizer. PACS too, are routinely used to fund lavish personal trips and a luxurious lifestyle. Candidates can loan cash to their campaign and enrich themselves off the interest they earn.

Schweizer documents a grim picture of our national political leadership. It reflects the core of Lord Acton’s famous dictum, “All power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” *Extortion* is a follow up to *Throw Them All Out*, in which the author fired his first broadsides against the political corruption that plagues our nation’s capital. It’s another powerful reminder that one of the fundamental problems with Washington, and why it doesn’t change, relates directly to the entrenched political power that resides over it.

While Schweizer could touch more on addressing the culture that permits this to happen, he should be applauded for raising awareness. Most of America has little to no understanding of how the system is used to enrich and protect those with the power, and certainly have no understanding of the complexity of political finance laws.

At the end of the book, the author offers his own suggestions for reform. He suggests action like banning the solicitation of funds while Congress is in session and banning certain kind of PACs that allow for members to turn campaign money into income and lifestyle perks.

The evidence in the book is well documented, overwhelming, and depressing. It’s a window into a kind of system that no longer serves us but that we now serve. After reading this, it should be clear the entrenched power in Washington has grown too big, with little interest for the liberty of the individual, or the Republic. The Roman orator Tacitus was right when he said, “The more numerous the laws, the more corrupt the government.” That by itself speaks to the dire mess we face.

Why is the Acton Institute Fighting the city of Grand Rapids for Non-Profit Property Tax Exempt Status?

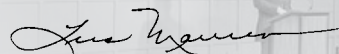
As many city governments seek additional revenue to deal with their growing budgets, one of the new emerging and favorite targets is non-profits. A new survey from the University of Michigan highlights how local government officials are looking to put the tax squeeze on non-profits, educational institutions, and charitable organizations. At Acton, we are currently experiencing this first hand. The city of Grand Rapids denied our property tax exemption request for our new \$ 7 million downtown headquarters. Acton lost an appeal to the city’s board of review and will appeal to Michigan’s state Tax Tribunal.

The city is trying to define us very narrowly as not being a charitable or educational organization but their argument does not persuade anyone familiar with our work for more than two decades. We are confident our appeal will be successful because of the existing case law as well as our long tradition of community service that has only expanded since our move into our new downtown headquarters. We’ve exceeded one of our main goals during this move with our ability to vastly improve our outreach to the Grand Rapids community and especially partnering with local ministries.

The city’s denial is not related to Acton’s standing as a tax-exempt 501(c)3 recognition by the IRS. That has never been in question and is an entirely separate matter. Part of the city’s argument is that the Acton Institute is not an entity of the state or supported with state funds. The bigger question though, is one of properly recognizing the role and value of non-profits and charitable organizations that are independent from the government.

Local, state, and the federal governments are increasingly reluctant to make room for independent charities and organizations. Too often, as society becomes collectivized, government officials believe they have the superior method and organization when it comes to alleviating poverty or addressing institutionalized problems. This kind of thinking promotes the *status quo* when it comes to the same kind of tired, harmful, and too often destructive economic policies. It’s also an anathema to the idea that is at the root of a free society, that the purpose of government is to work for the people, not the people for government.

Government at the local level is desperately looking for new funding sources. It has turned its sights on non-profits and charities for now. Part of the reason is because localities often don’t have the courage to ask for tax increases from the voters to meet their overextended public expenditures. We are only asking for the laws in Grand Rapids to be applied fairly and consistently. But we are committed to conveying the importance and power of improving our local community and the world apart from government.



Kris Alan Mauren
Executive Director



Christian Environmentalism and the Temptation of Faux Asceticism

By Fr. Michael Butler and Prof. Andrew Morriss

It is important to clarify the Church's teaching on asceticism because many voices in the environmental movement encourage a kind of ascetical lifestyle in the name of "ethical consumption." Orthodox writers on the environment are not immune to the temptation of putting the ascetical tradition of the Church in the service of another agenda. For example, the conclusion of the Inter-Orthodox Conference on Environmental Protection, held in Crete in 1991, states: "Humanity needs a simpler way of life, a renewed asceticism, for the sake of creation."

Many Orthodox writers call on asceticism—fasting in particular—to reduce consumption. Deacon Dr. John Chryssavgis, the theological advisor to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on environmental issues, has noted that, "In his now classic article entitled 'The Roots of our Ecological Crisis,' Lynn White already suspected—although he did not elaborate on—the truth behind asceticism." Furthermore, Orthodox theologian Elizabeth Theokritoff has pointed out the beneficial effects of Orthodox fasting discipline (which includes abstaining from sexual relations) on population control. Given the temptation to which many have succumbed, a few words on the proper role of asceticism are in order.

Asceticism comes from the Greek *askēsis*, which simply means "exercise." Asceticism, therefore, is simply spiritual exercise undertaken for the health of the soul. Here, we must be careful to set aside

popular caricatures of asceticism as either a kind of masochistic, self-flagellated misery or a kind of Gnostic attitude which exalts lofty spiritual things over crass material things. (This latter view is often associated with those environmentalists who have constructed a religion of nature worship.) With regard to this caricature of asceticism, Romanian Orthodox theologian Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae noted:

According to the current use of the word, asceticism has a negative connotation. It means a negative holding back, a negative restraint, or a negative effort. This is because the sinful tendencies of our nature, the habitual things that lead to its death, have come to be considered as the positive side of life. Ascetical striving, though negative in appearance, confronts the negative element in human nature with the intent to eliminate it by permanent opposition.

Viewed in proper balance, asceticism is a positive, life-affirming attitude and set of practices that seeks human freedom by overcoming the passions—the sinful and disordered habits and attitudes that poison our relationships, primarily with God but also with ourselves, our neighbor, and the world. These passions are the "seven deadly sins" of classical spirituality that enslave the heart, cloud the reason, poison relationships, and in general lead to the disintegration and corruption of the soul, and by extension, to the misery of the world caused by corrupted people

acting in corrupted ways.

Much could be said about asceticism and the passions, but for our purposes, we might say that to be ascetic is to learn to live rightly on the earth with God, our neighbor, and creation. With regard to our relationships, our ascetic stance before God is one of humility and obedience. Before our neighbor, as the Gospel puts it, we seek to be the last, not the first; humbled, not exalted; the servant, not the master. (Mark 10:13). Before creation, Greek Orthodox theologian Metropolitan John Zizioulas tells us, "Man dies as to his claim to be God in creation, and instead recognizes God as its Lord." In each case, we are brought to a new relationship with the other; in the case of our relationship to creation, an ascetical stance clearly alters the demands we make on the material world, both what we ask of it and how much we ask. In this respect, Orthodoxy's call to ascetic striving for the sake of one's salvation is in line with free market principles of voluntary activity and lifestyle choices.

The ascetical tradition of the Orthodox Church includes many practices: prayer, fasting, almsgiving, keeping vigil, *inter alia*. They are the active part of the spiritual life, our voluntary cooperation with the grace of God. As such, it is important that we not be tempted to use the ascetical practices of the Church for ends they were not designed to serve. Thus, we need to be careful of "environmental consciousness" masquerading as authentic spiritual practice. Moreover, we must keep in mind that it is

the believer's practice of asceticism, not asceticism qua asceticism, that is important.

For example, fasting out of ecological conviction, or eating "lower on the food chain" (i.e., avoiding meat or eating a vegan diet) is spiritually useless for the Christian. Fasting is not dieting; neither is it an ecological statement. For a Christian, fasting is a spiritual discipline that is fruitful when it is joined with prayer and repentance, a discipline that is oriented toward God to effect the purification and transfiguration of the heart. What is more, for Orthodox Christians to use the ascetical discipline of fasting for any other purpose undermines its real purpose. If we do not use ascetical disciplines to grow in a right relationship with God, we will not grow in right relationships with our neighbor or with creation either.

This leads us to a deep irony that seems to be lost on those who focus on the superficial similarities between Christian asceticism and environmentalists' calls for restricting consumption: Concern for the environment that distracts us from the purification and illumination of the heart will actually hinder our ability to transfigure creation and offer it back to Christ. That is to say, concern for environmentalism is inversely proportional to our effectiveness in transfiguring the environment. At this point, we are tempted to leave off writing altogether, lest our efforts undermine the end we are trying to pursue. Having drawn attention to the danger and the temptation, however, we can proceed if we do so with caution.

In short, spiritual tools must be used for spiritual ends. We "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matt. 6:33). As Elizabeth Theokritoff reminds us in her 2010 book, *The Salvation of the World and Saving the Earth: An Orthodox Christian Approach*:

The salvation of the earth is not in our hands, either individually or as a human collective: it is the work of the Creator and Savior, and our task is to conform ourselves to him. Re-created

in the image of the new Adam, we are called to image God's love and compassion for all creation, so fulfilling his economy of salvation by growing into his likeness.

What then is the Christian to do to integrate the Church's ascetical traditions into his or her interactions with God's creation? First, we must resist the temptation

"First, we must resist the temptation to impose our asceticism on others..."

to impose our asceticism on others, as the value of the ascetical practices lie in the voluntary denial of consumption as a means of growing closer to God. Using the power of the state to compel asceticism in others would thus be counterproductive in a spiritual sense. Moreover, we must distinguish our own practice of asceticism from efforts to deny others the benefits of God-given human creativity; we cannot force asceticism onto others. For example, efforts to restrict the increasing use of energy by the world's poor are at odds both with true asceticism and with our duty to be charitable to our neighbors. Given the horrific costs of indoor air pollution caused by burning dung and similar fuels in homes by the world's poorest, building electrical power plants in poor countries should be applauded.

Second, we must also avoid shifting the costs and burdens of our own "asceticism" onto others. Lobbying for subsidies and mandates for corn-based ethanol that leads to higher food prices, at tremendous cost to the world's poor, is a particularly pernicious example of faux asceticism in which the warm feelings of doing good among the wealthy are primarily paid for by the poorest. For example, a Tufts University study estimated that U.S. corn ethanol mandates cost Mexico \$1.5 to \$3 billion

through increased food prices from 2006 to 2011. Similarly, the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy imposes tremendous costs on the poor in developing countries by denying them markets for their agricultural products through subsidies to European farmers in the name of promoting sustainable agriculture.

Third, we must resist the temptation to seek to subsidize our own consumption. If doctors are enjoined to "first, do no harm," a similar injunction applies to government policies. Providing ourselves with subsidized goods and services, such as fuels, food, and electricity, not only encourages overconsumption of those goods and services, thus leading us away from both good stewardship and opportunities to practice asceticism, but also causes damage to God's creation. The vast, federally subsidized water projects in the western United States and the World Bank's tragic record of supporting destructive "infrastructure" projects such as dams in developing countries are two examples. No less damaging is the common practice in oil-producing nations of subsidizing consumption of fossil fuels—Venezuela's 4 cents per gallon of gasoline is similarly a destructive practice. In each case, creation is sacrificed to venal goals—such as purchasing voters' support for governments—that are inconsistent with our responsibility as stewards.

Nature has a right to be transformed and uplifted, spiritualized and revived, and mankind has an obligation to serve that right, to love nature, not for our sake alone, but for its own sake, and not just for the utility that it can provide. But such a realization requires of us an attitude toward the natural world that does not preclude stewardship of the world and its resources to meet human needs but goes beyond it to the fulfillment and perfection of creation for its own sake.

This essay was adapted from Creation and the Heart of Man: An Orthodox Christian Perspective on Environmentalism (Acton Institute, 2013). The monograph is available in the Acton Book Shop at shop.acton.org.

you to simply pay for these contraceptives or abortifacients.” And the government turns around at the outset and says, “You ought to just trust us that we’re going to protect your religious liberty and freedom of conscience,” which, of course, they don’t do. But I think there are various lessons we can learn even now.

And one of the things that is so important is, the early Baptists were insistent that this is religious liberty not just for themselves, but for everyone, because there’s a theological grounding for that. The early Baptists were saying, “Because there won’t be a government bureaucrat standing with a soul at the Judgment Seat - that means that there shouldn’t be a government bureaucrat between God and the soul and the conscience.” And so they were insistent that religious liberty isn’t about carving protections for just us, it’s about maintaining liberty for everyone. And that’s one of the reasons why one of the burdens that I have is to make sure that we have guaranteed freedom for everyone, not simply for evangelicals, not simply for Christians, but for all people.

With documents like the Manhattan Declaration and, of course, ecumenical organizations such as the Acton Institute, what is the necessity of ecumenical cooperation for engaging the broader culture?

It is necessary for us to stand together. We disagree often on all sorts of issues, but as we work together, often we find that we have more in common than we previously thought. In reading 20th Century Baptist documents on religious liberty,

they’re almost always written with the assumption that the great threat to religious liberty would be the Roman Catholic Church. We now find ourselves in a time where I’m working literally every day with Roman Catholic bishops and others in protecting religious liberty. And the threat that we face is not from Rome or from any authoritarian church government, real or perceived, but against a secularizing culture armed with state power. And so I think we have to work together, and we have to, as we’re doing that, recognize those points of commonality that we all have. And I think the pro-life movement has done a great deal



in preparing evangelicals and Catholics and others to stand together, because we’ve had to work together for so long to protect the sanctity of human life. And we became accustomed to knowing one another and working in that way.

What are a few of the greatest cultural problems that are hampering the economic health and stability of families in America?

I think there are several cultural problems. One of those is a broad view of generational connectedness. It is easy for people to see the present moment as the only real moment, which moves us away

from a Biblical understanding of inheritance. Of course, in the Biblical world, an inheritance wasn’t typically a pile of money. It was a vocation, a calling. So a father might work to build up a fishing business or a carpentry business and then hand that to the next generation, knowing that the next generation would cultivate that even more. So a person is always thinking about what’s been given to him by his ancestors and also what he plans to cultivate and then hand over to the generations to come. I think that is very easy to be lost in a world in which we typically think of vocation simply in terms of individual self-fulfillment and the immediate moment.

And I think, of course, the breakdown of the family has tremendous economic consequences as well. When one is in the formative years of earning and vocation and that person has no sense of the future because the person isn’t thinking about marriage and isn’t thinking about children. Not just that the person hasn’t married yet, but the person

isn’t even thinking about that with any depth. I think that has economic consequences as well.

People read in the news about Christians refusing to bake cakes or offer other work services for homosexual weddings. Many people see this as discrimination. Why is that a religious liberty issue?

Christians can argue back and forth, as Christians have been doing, via social media over the last several weeks, about whether or not Jesus would bake a cake for a homosexual ceremony or a same-sex wedding. That’s really a less important

issue than the issue at hand. The issue at hand is whether or not the state has the power to coerce someone to participate using his or her creative gifts to celebrate something that that person believes to be deeply sinful. That is a government powerful enough to coerce and to force; this is a government that is too powerful and has set itself up as a god of the conscience. And I think there are tremendous implications from that not only for Christians, but for everyone. And I'm very frustrated by those Christians who would say, we ought to give the state the power to coerce people to either comply with participating in this ceremony or to lose their livelihoods. What about a Christian web-designer? Should he or she be forced to design a website for a pornographic company? It's legal. So should that person's conscience simply be run over in the process? I think that if the answer to that is yes, we have a society that is less free, and we have lost. We have eclipsed an understanding of the importance of the freedom of conscience in this country.

It has been suggested by some that your election to the ERLC recognizes a shift in how Southern Baptists engage cultural war issues. Is this an accurate assessment and if not, why?

I think that we must be cultural warriors, if what we mean by culture warriors is an engagement with the outside culture about what we believe and why that's important. I think we must be Christ-shaped culture warriors, meaning that we don't back down on the issues. We speak with truth. But we speak with a truth that is consistent with the mission that we have to see people reconciled to God. So I believe that the sort of cowardice that would not apply the Gospel to issues that are destroying people and destroying families and destroying communities is not consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

At the same time, I believe that our message cannot be simply one of condemnation, but of seeking to persuade people to be reconciled to God through the Gospel. So I think we have to be the sorts of cultural warriors who speak with a Galilean accent of both truth and grace.

Two of your sons are adopted. What theological lessons can we learn about Christ and the

Church from adopting children?

We adopted our first two sons after a long period of infertility and several miscarriages. And we were told that my wife and I would never be able to bear children. And so my wife said that she believed the Lord might be leading us to adopt. My response, I'm ashamed to say, initially was, I would love to adopt later on, but I would like for us to have our own children first. And that experience showed me what an impoverished view of the Gospel I had at the time. Through the process, the Lord changed my heart. And through the process of adopting our first two sons, I realized that through adoption, a real family is actually formed, so that family isn't simply the protection of selfish genes, but it's something more than that. And the Scripture speaks and says, "We have been adopted into the family of God."

"Congregations don't recognize that most threats to religious liberty do not come suddenly with the shock and awe of a gun barrel."

I was familiar, prior to adopting our sons, of course, with Romans 8, with Galatians 4, with Ephesians 1, but it hit me in a new way, because I found myself dealing with frustrating questions from people. Well, are they really brothers? Have you ever met their real mom? We received a lot of questions like that. And of course, I was having to say, this is their real mom. They are really brothers because they're part of the same family.

And it was through that I realized that's exactly the question that's being addressed in the New Testament. In the New Testament, there is no such thing as an adopted child of God, with adopted used as an adjective. There aren't the children and then the adoptive children.

There are the children of God, who come into the family through adoption in Jesus Christ. Adoption tells us how we come into the family of God, but it doesn't give us some secondary status once we do. And so adopted, I came to realize, is not an adjective; it's a past tense verb. And that changed for me much about what I understood about my relationship with God, about God's commitment to us for the future, after having adopted us in Christ. It totally reworked the way that I understood who I am in Christ.

We hear a lot about a 'silent war' on religious liberty, but what about the silence of many churches across America? This seems to be a topic too often neglected in many churches. Do you find that assessment accurate?

You're right that many churches are silent, and I think there are a couple of reasons for that. The first is that churches have become accustomed to the American constitutional guarantee of religious liberty, such that they do not perceive an immediate threat. Congregations don't recognize that most threats to religious liberty do not come suddenly with the shock and awe of a gun barrel. Most violations of religious liberty come first with the insidious slowness of a bureaucrat's pen. Secondly, I think many congregations have become burned over by hysterical claims of anti-Christian bias in every arena of life by political activists. This has the same effect that 'act now or Miami will be under water' fundraising appeals have on the environmental movement. When genuine religious liberty threats emerge, as we are facing now in a way I believe unprecedented since the founding era, many Christians see this as simply the same thing they were hearing before with the 'war on Christmas' and so forth. We must do a better job educating pastors and church leaders on how religious liberty is not simply a matter for constitutional scholars and Washington activists but a birthright granted by God which must be guarded by all of us. ■■■■

Richard Baxter [1615 – 1691]

It is God's great mercy to mankind, that he will use us all in doing good to one another; and it is a great part of his wise government of the world, that in societies men should be tied to it by the sense of every particular man's necessity; and it is a great honour to those that he maketh his almoners, or servants, to convey his gifts to others; God bids you give nothing but what is his, and no otherwise your own but as his stewards. It is his bounty, and your service or stewardship, which is to be exercised.

Richard Baxter is recognized by many as the most prolific theological writer of the 17th Century. He wrote 140 books, many of them while serving in the pastorate. Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, called Richard Baxter's *A Christian Directory*, "The greatest manual on Biblical counseling ever produced." Baxter's work is considered a treasured instruction on the habits of Christian love and holiness. William Orme, a 19th Century Scottish minister, was able to compile 23 volumes of Baxter's more practical theological works. Baxter's practical emphasis on things like pastoral counseling, the family, discipleship, and church discipline makes his writing especially relevant today. Max Weber believed Baxter embodied the Protestant ethic.

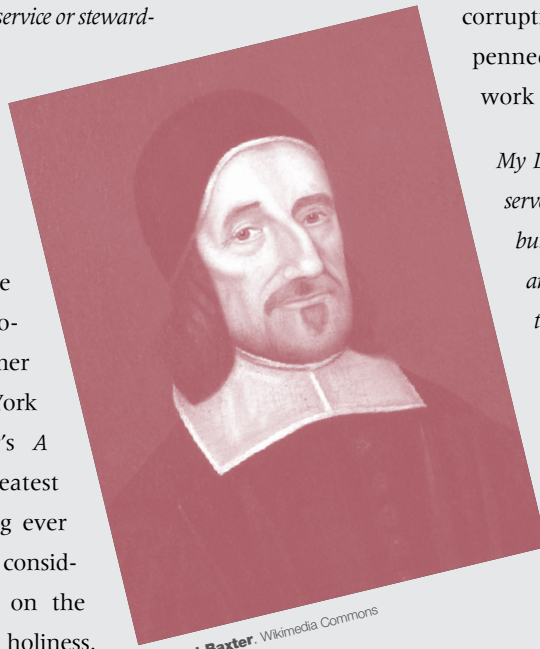
Baxter was born in a rural part of England in Rowton, Shropshire, and had far from the privileged education many of the most notable religious leaders of his era enjoyed. He studied to become a preacher and aligned himself with the English nonconformists and Puritan sects. While he was considered a moderate and peacemaker among Protestants, given his stance towards non-separation of the Anglican Church, he also was persecuted for his faith and spent time in prison.

Baxter was plunged into the English Civil War and found

himself embroiled in the era's most notable religious controversies. He was expelled from Kidderminster, where he served as a pastor, because of the raging conflict. He soon advocated for and served as a chaplain for military troops during the war. His commitment to ministry and the heart of his flock is even more impressive given the rampant corruption of churches in 17th Century England. Baxter penned these words regarding Philippians 1:23 in his work *The Saints Everlasting Rest*:

My Lord, I have nothing to do in this World, but to seek and serve thee; I have nothing to do with a Heart and its affections, but to breathe after thee. I have nothing to do with my Tongue and Pen, but to speak to thee, and for thee, and to publish thy Glory and thy Will. What have I to do with all my Reputation, and Interest in my Friends, but to increase thy Church, and propagate thy holy Truth and Service? What have I to do with my remaining Time, even these last and languishing hours, but to look up unto thee, and wait for thy Grace, and thy Salvation?

Baxter also endlessly praised the value of work and spoke out against a spirit of dependency and sloth. "An idle beggar will accuse you of uncharitableness, because you maintain him not in sinful idleness, he declared. He praised the value of wealth but reminded those "the more you have, the more you have to give account for." In his humility, Baxter called himself a "mere Christian," a phrase that would later resonate with C.S. Lewis. An inscription of a statue of Baxter that stands today in Kidderminster reads: "Between the years 1641 and 1660 this town was the scene of the labors of Richard Baxter, renowned equally for his Christian learning and his pastoral fidelity. In a stormy and divided age, he advocated unity and comprehension, pointing the way to everlasting rest."



Richard Baxter. Wikimedia Commons



Reasons to Celebrate

President Barack Obama has just met with Pope Francis at the Vatican. It is always an important event when the president of our nation meets with one of the most important religious leaders in the world, regardless of who occupies either

office at the time of such a meeting.

There are topics I would have liked to see these two men discuss, but I, like most of the world, am not privy to most of their conversation. What I hope is this: that these two men, who have considerably different worldviews, are able to set aside differences for a meaningful discussion with fruitful results.

I think back a few decades to the relationship between Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II. While the two had basic Christian beliefs in common, they were shaped as men by very different experiences. While Reagan was serving stateside in the military during WWII, Karol Wojtyla was trying not to starve to death in Poland. Reagan was an American through-and-through; Pope John Paul II saw the world through the wide-angle lens of a philosopher. Yet, they both cared deeply about human freedom. Their work together (along with Margaret Thatcher) brought down a wall in Berlin and ended the Cold War.

We are not in that same kind of war right now (thanks be to God), but we have a deep divide in our nation and in our world. Religious liberty is at the core of this divide. President Obama speaks of “freedom to worship” rather than “freedom of religion” – a dangerous distinction. Christian persecution is at an all-time high in many parts of the world. Americans with deeply-held beliefs find themselves defending those beliefs in courts of law. Who could have imagined this, even a few years ago?

Millions of Catholics recently celebrated Lent, a time we seek to increase our faith through prayer, fasting, and alms-giving. At the “half-way” point of Lent, we celebrate “Laetare Sunday” or “Rejoice Sunday.” That may seem a bit odd, given the somber mood tone of the Lenten season. However, the point of Laetare Sunday is to remind us that even in times of difficulty there is

reason to celebrate, there is joy in grief, that even the harshest of circumstances have moments of happiness.

There is a beautiful passage from Isaiah:

*The desert and the parched land will exult;
the steppe will rejoice and bloom.*

*They will bloom with abundant flowers,
and rejoice with joyful song.*

*The glory of Lebanon will be given to them,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
They will see the glory of the LORD,
the splendor of our God.*

*Strengthen the hands that are feeble,
make firm the knees that are weak,*

Say to those whose hearts are frightened:

Be strong, fear not!

Here is your God,

he comes with vindication;

With divine recompense

he comes to save you. (Is. 35:1-4)

This entire chapter is full of glorious images: flowers blooming in the desert, streams that are lush and full. It is a respite in the desert; a place to relax and rejoice, to gather strength and refresh oneself. We need this as humans; we need to stop and restore ourselves in order to continue to fight for what is right.

Among the first words that Pope John Paul II spoke in his papacy echo the prophet Isaiah: “Be not afraid!” Pope Francis has certainly shown the world that he is a man of great joy, and has repeatedly asked the faithful to share the joy of faith with others. Being brave and joyful are not easy things to do in our world today. It is much easier to cower, to grieve, or to be bitter. We cannot do this. Good men and women – of all faiths – must be willing to do what is not easy. We must do as the prophet demands: fear not! We must strengthen our feeble and weak selves, take strength in the beauty of God’s creation, and continue the work of Ronald Reagan, John Paul II, and countless others who value the freedom to practice religion freely, openly, and with great rejoicing.

Rev. Sirico is president and co-founder of the Acton Institute.

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