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2022 Napa Institute, Napa, California
Conference Theme: “The Way, The Truth and The Life”
July 28, 2022

The Power of the Powerless — Walking the Way of Truth

- Introduction
 - Thank you, Father Spitzer, for that introduction. I’m grateful to the Napa Institute for its invitation to speak again this year during this conference dedicated to embracing Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life.
 - We are living in an age, a Next America, in which relating to Christ in this three-fold way can make Christians feel increasingly marginalized if not opposed. There are many who prefer to walk their own way, believe their own truth, and define for themselves the meaning of life, not to mention, as Justice Kennedy in the now overturned Casey decision, called the meaning of the universe. There are others who respond to the claim that Jesus is the Way, Truth and Life, not with dismissed indifference but direct opposition, believing that Christ’s way is a journey toward a joyless dead end, whose truth a pack of superstitious, hateful lies, and whose life is an empty promise of self-crucifixion. These rejections, whether they come from indifference or contempt, have converged in many places in our increasingly secularized culture not just to jettison Christian thought about God, the human person, and the world, but to blackball those believers who order their lives to it.
 - In the meantime, many in culture, the academy, technological leaders and the branches of government have been actively trying to impose a new way of ordering human existence and society — a new way, new truth, and new life — and to banish Christianity-inspired anthropology, metaphysics, ethics, epistemology and cosmology from the realm of polite, enlightened, safe and acceptable discourse. This has accelerated in recent decades through what was once called political correctness, then morphed into wokeness, then metastasized into cancel culture.
 - We see one manifestation of it in the way science is being manipulated and politicized. The motto “follow the science” is used not to follow the science with regard to when human life begins, what biology teaches about human identity, male or female, even to try to quash all debate, research and questioning with regard to the severity and prudential response to climate change, the pandemic, and other issues.
 - We likewise see another example in the control of our lexicon, trying to force people to refer to others by names and pronouns they know do not correspond to the truth, with severe penalties for non-compliance.
 - We see it in movements that are trying to undermine social and interracial harmony and national cohesion, by things like critical race theory and the 1619 project.
 - And these cultural poisons are being poured into almost all aspects of life — into schools and universities, into the workplace, into movies, television programs and other formative aspects of the culture, into sports, into bathrooms, and even into many Churches.

- The sum total of these oppressive, seemingly omnipresent ideologies are making many fearful for their jobs, their children, their country, their civilization, in short, for their and our common future. Many feel helpless before this organized, well-funded, occasionally ruthless juggernaut, whose leaders seem intent to use everything they have at their disposal — the branches of government, educational institutions, corporate boards, cultural influences, the media and even occasionally old-fashioned mob intimidation and violence — to bully people into acquiescence, tolerance, acceptance and cooperation.
- Many are wondering how to respond, whether resistance is possible or prudent, whether it's realistic to hope just to be left alone, whether there's any way to flip things right-side-up anew.
- Vaclav Havel and the Power of the Powerless
 - Well, this is not the first time ideologies hostile to Christianity, not to mention to truths accessible to reason, have tried to bulldoze cultures. We can learn a great deal from how those in the past, including in the very recent past, have responded to militant ideologies.
 - We can look to the heroes in the fight against Nazism and Communism last century, who show us many of the virtues needed, people like the leaders of the great Polish resistance — Blessed Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński and Saint John Paul II — or the Russian Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, and many others whose names are not as well known in the west.
 - One of the most important figures is Vaclav Havel, the Prague-born playwright and essayist, who became a leader in the Czechoslovak resistance, who was harassed, beaten, imprisoned for several years, became one of the leading figures of the Velvet Revolution that toppled the communist government and system in 1989, and eventually he was elected the first and only president of the post-Communist Czechoslovakia and the founding President of the Czech Republic.
 - In October 1978, incidentally the same month Cardinal Karol Wojtyła from Krakow was elected the 264th Peter and called the world not to be afraid to open wide the doors to Christ, Havel wrote his most famous work, entitled *The Power of the Powerless*, which dissected the nature of the Communist state and ideology and proposed the most effective way to resist.
 - The 80 page essay was originally supposed to be for a book on the nature of freedom in which Havel's thoughts would be considered and responded to by several Polish and Czechoslovak intellectuals, but that fell through and Havel needed to publish it as a stand-alone essay with the help of illegal, clandestine printers. The essay had a huge impact not just in Czechoslovakia but in various countries behind the Iron Curtain, becoming, through translations, a manifesto for ordinary people, dissidents and opposition movements, like the Solidarity Movement in Poland.
 - In it he described how those who seem to be totally powerless politically have within themselves a power to remedy their own powerlessness, something that can begin with one and then build. His diagnostic and prescriptive capacities, his capacity to analyze the problems and the best way to resist, are very useful for us today as we think about the ways to resist the ideologies of our age. Even though his essay was translated into English in 1985, his insights are not really well known today in the States. I'd like to summarize what his insights were and afterward link them not only to our situation but to the Gospel.

- Havel
 - Havel began his essay by diagnosing what he called the post-totalitarian system, which he said was a new type of dictatorship in which power was wielded not by one or a few, but by an anonymous, highly-bureaucratized system, that became an ideology, a secularized religion, that sought to provide an illusion of identity, dignity and morality and to influence and control almost every aspect of life. The price of admission and survival in the system, he said, was the surrender of one's own reason, conscience and responsibility.
 - Life in the PTS, he said, was thoroughly permeated by hypocrisy and lies suffused through their vocabulary. He gave many examples:
 - government by bureaucracy was called popular government;
 - the working class was enslaved in the name of the working class;
 - the complete degradation of the individual was presented as his ultimate liberation;
 - depriving people of information was called making it available;
 - the arbitrary abuse of power was called observing the legal code;
 - the repression of culture was called cultural development;
 - the expansion of imperial influence was presented as support for the oppressed;
 - the lack of free expression became the highest form of freedom;
 - farcical elections became the highest form of democracy;
 - banning independent thought became the most scientific of worldviews;
 - military occupation became fraternal assistance.
 - He said that because the regime was so captive to its own lies, it had to falsify everything: the past, the present, the future, statistics. It pretended not to possess an omnipotent and unprincipled police apparatus, to respect human rights, to persecute no one, to fear nothing, to pretend nothing.
 - Havel said that citizens did not need to believe all of these mystifications, but they did have to behave as though they did, to tolerate them silently, and to get along with those who lived by them. They had, in short, to "live within a lie," to play by the rules of the game, to accept the ritual, and to embrace appearances as reality. The stability of the post-totalitarian system was built on lies and would work, he said, only as long as people were willing to live within the lie.
 - Haclav asked how all of this was possible, that a people could cooperate and tolerate such intellectual, political and cultural subjugation. He said that there is "obviously" in modern humanity a tendency toward the creation or toleration of such a system. People can be compelled to live within a lie only because they are capable of doing so, accepting a profane trivialization of his inherent humanity, losing one's identity, merging with and anonymous crowd and "flowing comfortably ... down the river of pseudolife." What makes this possible, he analyzed, is that most people are willing to sacrifice their spiritual and moral integrity for material comfort and stability and to refuse to take responsibility for anything higher than their own personal survival.
 - The remedy, he said, what he called the power of the powerless, was to begin to say what they think outloud, to step out of living within the lie, to live within the truth, to say that the emperor is naked, to resist being manipulated, to straighten one's backbone and refuse to sacrifice one's identity and dignity, and to begin to live in solidarity and concern for those suffering injustice. To live within the truth, he said,

shows an advanced degree of interior freedom, or “inner emancipation,” in which one is no longer enslaved by fears but courageously starts to reassume responsibility for behaving in a fully human way.

- He says that one normally begins to live within the truth quietly, in the pre-political “hidden sphere” of human life, but eventually starts to speak and live the truth in the light. That creates a crisis for the post-totalitarian system, which survives, Havel said, only by a conspiracy of people to live within the lies of the ideology that sustains it. Those who begin to live the truth conspicuously, and receive the unwanted attention of the communist leaders and police, become “dissidents,” whom he says will normally suffer more, but whose sufferings will often draw greater attention. Dissidents, he said, not only live within the truth, but begin to serve the truth, to articulate it, to show that living by the truth is possible, and inspire others to do so.
- When enough begin to do so, Havel wrote, a “second culture” will form, indicating where a truthful life can be lived, where the world of appearances is shattered and where people’s humanity can be restored.
- In the essay, Havel warned the West that democratic societies are likewise vulnerable to living within the lie of ideology, because they’re founded, he said, more on mutual mistrust than confidence, and often foster collective irresponsibility flowing from a notion of freedom untethered to responsibility. This is abetted, he said, by the dictatorship of consumerism in the west, which can literally demoralize people by forming them to live according to convenient, comfortable untruths because people don’t want to sacrifice material well-being for higher spiritual or moral values.
- We can draw several important lessons from Havel for our situation today:
 - In the midst of the militant ideologies that we are confronting, there is still the power to use our interior freedom to live courageously according to the truth, according to reality, even if we should have to suffer mildly or severely on account of it.
 - Like Havel, and with the help of his perspective and categories, we need to diagnose the toxic ideologies being pumped into our human and social ecologies and to resist, and help others to resist, the pressure to align our thoughts, words and actions to them.
 - We also need to be on guard against the seductive power of consumerist and technological dependency, which can make it easier for us and others to sacrifice ultimately our reason, conscience, responsibility, identity, dignity and morality for comfort and convenience.
- The Gospel: Jesus the Way, the Truth and the Life
 - What Havel boldly wrote about it in 1978 and suffered for was neither unique nor original. Solzhenitsyn had described four years earlier in a *samizdat* article that the starting point to resist communism was to “live not by lies,” thoughts that Havel himself mentioned in the *Power of the Powerless* had a big influence on him. The message of living according to the truth is the heart of the Gospel and the words, witness and way of Jesus.
 - In his dialogue with Pontius Pilate on Good Friday, from which the image for this presentation was taken, Jesus told him that the reason he was born and had come into the world was “to give witness to the truth,” the truth about God, the truth about the human person and full flourishing, the truth about good and evil, life and

death, heaven and hell. Against the slavery to ignorance, to concupiscence, and to sin, he came to proclaim the truth that would make us free. And he would do so not just by his words, but by calling us to follow him who is the Truth and to unite ourselves to him. For him it wasn't enough merely to know the truth, but, as St. Paul reminded the first Christians in Ephesus, to choose to "live the truth in love," either in season or out.

- We see in Jesus the greatest witness of all to the power of the powerless against the prince of the world, of the truth against the "liar" and "father of lies." The way he indicated for us to follow is a narrow path that many sadly do not choose, a route of the beatitudes, ultimately an uphill, bloody, way of the Cross, featuring self-emptying love rather than self-serving egotism. Jesus tells us, "I am that path," and beckons us to join him on it. For us, it's a road of continual conversion, as we seek to live in the real, real world, rather than in the imaginary godless existence that scientific empiricism and secularist ideologies propose as the rootless ground of existence. It's a journey in which we avert from lies, advert to the truth about us and others, and convert, literally turn with Christ, as we, together with him and his help, seek to live the truth in love.
- How do we grow in this capacity to live the truth? I'd like to propose several natural and then supernatural means.
- Human Means of Growth in Living the Truth
 - Refusing to lie, when our age abounds in spin, euphemisms, false news, half-truths, and many unabashed, outright deceptions.
 - Saying the truth, even when it's hard or unpopular. This doesn't mean using the truth as a weapon to hurt people, but it does mean speaking the truth with charity in a way that can attract someone to see want to live it, however challenging.
 - Not seeking the approval of others. So often we'll keep our mouths shut about something we clearly know is erroneous out of fear of losing the esteem of others. The less we enslave ourselves to others' opinions, the greater our capacity to live the truth well.
 - Giving what the Christian tradition calls "fraternal correction" with charity, helping a brother or a sister to reflect on and improve upon what the person has said or done, or failed to say or do. This loving art of fraternal correction is a means by which we can learn how to say difficult truths better, in a way that minimizes possible offense. Similarly, the better we receive fraternal corrections from others, even when given with anger, condescension or hypocrisy, the better we will be able to live in the truth of our own actions, not to mention take criticism constructively, even when it may be destructively given.
 - Not bearing "false witness" by accommodating to the ideologies of the age, as if we, by tacit acquiescence, agree with them.
 - Making sure that when we look at our freedom, we anchor it to the truth rather than our whims, which is a form of slavery.
 - Living the "grammar" of truth in human relationships, to make sure they correspond to the truth and dignity of the other. This is particularly important with regard to sexual relationships, to ensure that sexual relations put into body language the commitment that real love requires.

- Nourishing friendships with those who speak the truth and do the truth. Over time we become more and more like our friends, and the more courageous they are as being people of the truth, the easier it will be for us to speak and live the truth, too.
- Learning to mortify ourselves with regard to material goods so that we won't cave into consumerism and to develop a spirit of sacrifice that makes it much easier for us to go without what ideologues won't want to concede to us or try to take away from us.
- And learning to live the truth not just with begrudging acceptance but with deep and abiding joy. The more we rejoice in the truth, to recognize it as a gift and to celebrate it, the stronger will be to share it and live in it, even and especially when others around us don't yet recognize it as a gift.
- Supernatural Means of Growth in Living the Truth
 - There are also many supernatural means to help us to grow in living the truth.
 - Making time for personal prayer, in which, through silence and solitude, we see God and the light of his truth, as he helps to illumine all of our life by that truth.
 - Forming our conscience, as we seek to align our reason and will to the voice of God whispering his truth within.
 - Going regularly to confession, as we face the truth about ourselves, about our thoughts, words, actions and failures to act, and plead for God's mercy and help.
 - Growing in our knowledge of the Word of God, by which Jesus seeks to do what he prayed for during the Last Supper, to "sanctify us in the truth" of his word. The word of God is like a mirror in which we see ourselves as God made us, like St. James said, and become not just idle listeners but doers of the world.
 - Attending more frequently and fruitfully the Holy Mass, in which Christ himself and the Church forms us how to worship God "in spirit and truth." The more we adore Christ in his real Presence on the altar, the tabernacle and monstrance, the easier it is to live in his presence — he who is the Truth — throughout our life. During this three-year Eucharistic Revival just begun by the Church in the US, it's a great time for us to grow in our Eucharistic knowledge, faith, amazement, love and life and that will help us to become more and more men and women of the truth.
 - Living according to the Holy Spirit, in which the one whom Jesus calls the "Spirit of Truth" that he and God the Father send us will seek to "lead us to all the truth" not just conceptually but in action. The Holy Spirit helps us to know the truth, understand it, and to live it, prudently, wisely, courageously, reverently and with holy awe for God and others.
 - Loving our neighbor, in which we recognize in depth who our neighbor is, made in God's image and likeness, and begin to act in accordance with his or her dignity. The more we serve others, the more we seek their genuine good, the more we overcome the egocentrism that can obscure us from the truth.
 - Learning how to suffer together with the Lord, recognizing that the Cross is what St. Paul called "the power and wisdom of God," the true power of the

powerless, even though it remains a scandal and folly to so many. If living the lie often happens out of fear of suffering, the path to living the truth is overcoming that fear, by learning how to unite everything, including the pains, difficulties and daily contradictions to him. That was, as Tim Gray said earlier this afternoon, the culmination of Jesus' formation of Peter. It's also key in his formation of every disciple.

- That leads to the final supernatural means — accepting the possibility of martyrdom. The first Christians, we remember, were not able to be baptized as adults until they were ready to be martyred, to be true to God under fire. St. John Paul II, in his beautiful 1993 document entitled “The Splendor of Truth” called the martyrs the supreme witness to the inviolability of truth, preferring to give their life rather than deny God, the truth about Him and us. Today the Church in the United States celebrates the feast day of Blessed Stanley Rother, a priest of Oklahoma who gave his life as a missionary to help his parishioners in Guatemala come to know, love and live with Jesus, the Way, Truth and Life and was killed 41 years ago today in Santiago Atitlán because he refused to be stopped by the lies and intimidation by paramilitary ideologies trying to exploit his people. He shows us that supreme witness to the Christ the Way, Truth and Life.
- Living the Gospel: The True Power and Powerless
 - The entire message of the Gospel — what Jeff Cavins earlier this morning called the kerygma — is a description of the Power of the Powerless.
 - Jesus described the kingdom of God as something that begins like a tiny mustard seed that grows huge, or a pinch of leaven that can lift up the whole dough. In worldly logic, the kingdom seems so weak and insignificant but it contains within a power to change the whole world.
 - That kingdom began when a 14-year-old girl gave her fiat to the messenger of the King, who then grew as a vulnerable child within her womb, was born in a stable, hunted by assassins, evicted by a mob from his hometown, ultimately hated, arrested, tortured, and crucified by the powers of his day. But he rose again on the third day, showing the ultimate power of truth over lies, of good over evil, of life over death.
 - That kingdom continued through the selection of 12 “nobodies,” 11 of whom, after betrayals, gave verbal and existential witness to the truth, despite persecutions, until their own death. It continued still through generations of martyrs, saints and ordinary people, living and transmitting the truth down to our own day.
 - We are the spiritual heirs of that power, that power of Jewish slaves against Pharaoh and his armies and charioteers, of David against Goliath, of Gideon with his 300 water drinkers against the Midianites' 35,000 troops, of Elijah versus the 850 priests of Ba'al and Asherath, of Esther versus Haman, of the three young men against Nebuchadnezzar, of the Maccabees against the Greeks, of Christ versus the Sanhedrin, Pilate, Herod and the devil, of Stephen against Saul, and of the converted Saul, Paul, against his Jewish persecutors and Roman executioners, ... and fast forward, of the pro-life movement in our country against the ideology of the culture of death, in the Dobbs decision, which gives us confidence for the next stages of the good fight for life.
 - It was St. Paul who recognized, “When I am weak, then I am strong!” (2 Cor 12:10) and how “I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13). The power of

the powerless is in fact Christ himself, Christ in us, Christ whose power radiates all the more when we feel at our weakness, who wants to empower us with his presence to do all things in him, not everything we want to do, but everything we need to do, by becoming other Christs in the middle of the world.

- Christ refused to ask his Father to send “twelve legions of angels” (Mt 26:53) when the soldiers of the high priest came to arrest him, but through meekness, humility and truth, he ultimately overturned worldly power structures, infusing courage into disciples in every age, including our own.
- To live the truth Christ reveals and enfleshes is the ultimate power of the powerless. The Gospel is the ultimate revolution against the lies of every age and we are the disciples of the Definitive Revolutionary in all of human history.
- St. John Paul II, who himself lived within the truth despite Nazi and Communist occupation and ideologies, summarized in his encyclical on the “Splendor of the Truth” (1993) the humble but definitive strength with which Christ has sent us out to empower the world, which is a fitting summary of what I’ve tried to say and what all the speakers on this first day have sought to elucidate:
- “It is urgent,” he said, “to rediscover and to set forth once more the authentic reality of the Christian faith, which is not simply a set of propositions to be accepted with intellectual assent, but a lived knowledge of Christ, a living remembrance of his commandments, and a *truth to be lived out*, ... an encounter, a dialogue, a communion of love and of life between the believer and Jesus Christ, the Way, and the Truth, and the Life (cf. *Jn* 14:6).
- In response to the many lies and ideologies of the age, let us recommit, one choice at a time and with the overall commitment of our life, to follow Christ the Way, to believe and proclaim Christ the Truth, and to embrace, love and introduce others to Christ the Life, ... to whom be “glory, and honor, and power”(Rev 5:12) forever and ever.