



REFLECTION

I've Got a Secret

*Everyone Loves Secrets,
But Today They Are Killing Us*

FR. CHARLES BOUCHARD, OP, STD

Everyone likes to be an insider, to get the scoop and to carry a big secret. It is human nature. Sometimes it is just a question of harmless gossip or falling for a marketer's pitch — a vague but intriguing promise of fame or fortune. When many people begin to search for and believe false information, it leads to a conspiracy theory. In a public health crisis, being drawn to that sensational nugget of information can have deadly consequences.

Conspiracy theories are nothing new. Some are political. For instance: Who really killed JFK? What happened at Benghazi? How was the 2020 election rigged? Others are personal, often aimed at celebrities. Still others challenge medical or scientific evidence (such as COVID-19 is a nefarious plot by the “deep state” or China). The worst conspiracy theories try to disparage, isolate or even eliminate minorities.

One thing they all have in common is that they are gnostic. Gnosticism is an ancient heresy based on the belief that there is a special kind of secret knowledge, often of uncertain origin, that is given to only a limited number of insiders or “initiates.” This was so prevalent in early Christianity that there is a whole body of literature known as the “gnostic gospels,” non-canonical Scriptures (including the Secret Book of James) that claimed to have the real story of Jesus. Adherents were once initiated in secret rites. Today they are initiated in chat rooms and social media sites.

COVID is a crisis of public health, which is bad

enough; but it is also a crisis of truth. Is there an objective reality? Can we know it? Or are we in a post-truth world where nothing can be established with certainty? Is there no way to test assertions and opinions for their conformity with reality? Is my opinion (or my cable channel) just as true as yours?

Lee McIntyre, the author of *Post-Truth*, says the book's title means that we live in an era where truth is at risk, where we're in danger of losing sight of what truth means. He defines post-truth

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as the “political subordination of reality” and “a tactic that's used by authoritarians and their wannabes to control the flow of information so that they can then control the populace.”

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lishing truth. Yet many people reject scientific evidence of the effectiveness and safety of COVID-19 vaccines. They believe the virus is an effort by Russia to plant microchips in us, that it is transmitted by 5G cell phone towers or that COVID can be cured by chloroquine or an anti-parasitic drug intended for large animals. Others believe the vaccines were rushed, that they will alter our DNA or even cause autism. Just yesterday I heard one vaccine resister say he did not want to take it because it contained formaldehyde and antifreeze.

Gnosticism was condemned by the Church because it was divisive and it tended to dismiss physical reality, including the body, as inferior to the spirit. Modern conspiracy theories are divisive, too, and they also reject physical and scientific evidence in favor of shadowy, unverifiable knowledge.

There are theological mysteries revealed by God that we accept in faith. However, God doesn't expect us to take everything on faith, thereby defying logic and science. Catholics believe that in addition to the Bible and the Book of Revelation, we can also know truth through reasonable reflection on human nature (this is what we call natural law, even though the term is widely misunderstood). We learn about human nature through our own experiences and through scientific investigation. As we learn about what it means to be human, we also discover God's plan, planted in our very being. God deliberately created us with bodies and became incarnate as a kind of revelation. As Luke Timothy Johnson says in his excellent book, *The Revelatory Body*, "the human body [is] the medium of God's revelation. ... Indeed, the entire point of incarnation is that the human body of Jesus was capable of bearing the revealing power and presence of God. ... the incarnation raises to the most explicit level possible the conviction implicit in creation, prophecy and covenant: the human body not only can reveal God, it is the privileged medium of divine self-disclosure."¹

I am happy to say that Catholics are being vaccinated at a rate higher than the national average.² Given our commitment to the common good and

solidarity, that is as it should be. But vaccinations are not enough. We also need to resist the culture of secrecy and the rejection of truth that nourishes skepticism in the first place. This is where the virtue of temperance comes in.

We usually think of temperance as having to do with desires for food and drink. That is accurate, but temperance encompasses desires for anything we find pleasurable, including the yearning for knowledge. Long before the internet, the *National Enquirer* and other tabloids understood that "inquiring minds want to know." Wanting to

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learn and to be informed is good. But it is "what" we want to know that is important. Pursuing knowledge that is false or harmful to others is the vice of curiosity, desiring to know things we don't need to know.

Uncritical appropriation of conspiracy theories is a vice. The internet has a million hiding places for secret knowledge. It is easy to wander in, find a theory that consoles us with easy answers and to then share it, which can lead others to make bad choices that endanger lives. This is not always the result of malicious intent. Sometimes it is because we are unsophisticated consumers of information. Most of us know how to distinguish a legitimate credit offer from a scam and how to recognize a deal that's too good to be true. However, we are not as good at assessing information we find online. Nevertheless, whatever medium we use, we have to control our curiosity and submit what we hear to critical analysis.

Pope Benedict once said that we "cannot rest content with a superficial and unquestioning exchange of skeptical opinions and experiences of life. All of us are in search of truth, and we share this profound yearning more today than ever." So, let's continue to get vaccinated as an act of



love, as Pope Francis recently said. Let's wear our masks and support their use in schools and public places. Mask and vaccination mandates do restrict our freedom, but if we believe in our common life — and that God saves all of us together through the death and resurrection of Jesus — we will happily embrace these small inconveniences and even some risk. It is, after all, the body of Christ that we are protecting.

Let us also learn to cultivate the virtue of temperance, especially when dealing with the internet. Let us be critical thinkers whose goal is truth, even when it is not as interesting or as easy to access as gossip. Let us be cautious about what we desire to know, and especially cautious about wanting to get in on theories that are not only false but dangerous.

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NOTES

1. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Revelatory Body: Theology as Inductive Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 56-57.
2. Jack Jenkins, "Survey: Vaccine Hesitancy Declines Among Faith Groups, Spurred Partly by Religious Appeals," Religious News Service, July 28, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/07/28/survey-vaccine-hesitancy-declines-among-faith-groups-spurred-partly-by-religious-appeals/>.

This article details increased vaccine acceptance, including this example: "The change was even more dramatic among Hispanic Catholics, who increased their vaccine acceptance from 56% to 80% in that time. Other groups have also seen their vaccine acceptance jump 11-15 percentage points to rise above 70%, such as white Catholics (79%), other Christians (77%), the religiously unaffiliated (75%), and white mainline Protestants (74%)."

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