

TELLING OUR STORY

Catholics Can Cultivate Genuine Hope by Emphasizing The Human Dimension in Culture and Politics

BY MARGARET
O'BRIEN STEINFELS



Ms. Steinfels is editor, Commonweal, New York City. This article is adapted from her address at the Joint Assembly of the Catholic Health Associations of Canada and the United States, Montreal, June 1991.

We North Americans, who share a peaceful boundary and an open border, have other boundaries at which we live in some anxiety—an anxiety that gnaws at the edges of our consciousness. In our nations—full of unprecedented affluence, remarkable efficiency, and incredible technology—how often do we ask ourselves whether we are running things or things are running us?

To answer that question, I want to talk about modernity, tradition, and the connections between them. There are the times, the age in which we live, what we lovingly call modernity. There are the benefits and challenges modernity poses for our religious tradition and the human condition. Under its rule, what do we mean by hope in the last decade of the twentieth century?

Then there is our religious tradition and the challenges that it ought to pose to modernity—challenges it is by no means clear we Catholics

are able or willing to raise, as the current debate about Catholic identity suggests. Are we losing it?

If we are not going to lose this debate, are there useful and constructive and effective ways of thinking about the task of our living as though what Jesus taught and did makes sense, makes sense in a modern world that thinks and acts as if it has or will soon have all the answers?

WHAT IS HOPE?

Perhaps everything will turn out all right, but is that what hope is all about? And here Vaclav Havel, playwright and now president of Czechoslovakia, has some cues for our own situation.

Havel was interviewed in 1985 by a fellow Czech living in exile in West Germany. Things were changing in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, but it was not clear how. Certainly what was to happen in 1989 was unimaginable. By

Summary In the West the experience of modernity frequently leads people to ask whether they are running things or things are running them. The answer lies in the connection between modernity and religious tradition. Are there useful and constructive and effective ways of thinking about the task of our living as though what Jesus taught and did makes sense, makes sense in a modern world that thinks and acts as if it has or will soon have all answers?

Perhaps everything will turn out all right, but such optimism should not be confused with hope. As Vaclav Havel explains, hope "is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." To cultivate a perspective from which things can make sense, Catholics need to

find a way to tell their story so that it has relevance in the modern world. In particular, Catholics must find stories that will account for the shift that had been building in our culture over centuries but that the Church only fully acknowledged during the papacy of John XXIII.

To some extent, the stories will have to offer a counterstatement to the unintended negative effects of certain facets of the modern agenda. The stories will have to address the overemphasis on individuality that has resulted from the democratization of politics and culture, the uncritical belief that change is always for the better, and the modern world's power to overwhelm our ability to think critically about it. Finally, the stories will have to return a human dimension to economic and cultural life.

1985 Havel had spent six or seven years in prison. When he was out of prison, he was followed everywhere. He could not have his plays produced or write for publication in his own country.

In this context, his friend Karel Hvidsala asked him: Do you see a grain of hope anywhere in the 1980s? He replied:

The kind of hope I often think about

(especially in situations that are particularly hopeless, such as prison), I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world. . . . Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. . . .

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. . . . Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. . . . It is . . . hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.¹

Havel's is the sort of spirit we need to reflect on as we think about our own situation at the boundaries.

THE FIRE, THE PRAYER, THE FOREST

But before I address our situation, let me turn to a story that, I think, captures something of our modern predicament:

When the great Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it

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was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the

same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.²

This story is, in its poignant way, hopeful. Yet it hints at a darker possibility: If we can forget the fire, the prayer, and the place in the forest, can we not also forget the story?

We Catholics have a tendency to see stories as peripheral to our religious beliefs, to dogmas and doctrine. I carry about the deep-seated conviction that in the celebration of the Eucharist we have something better than a story: We have the real thing.

I have been taught by the younger generation, however, that belief and conviction about the real presence is not self-evident. It cannot be understood apart from the story of what Jesus did and of what we do when we gather for our Sunday liturgy. I am the recipient of generations of storytelling that my mother and father, my grandmothers, and Sr. Mary Bride, my second-grade teacher, passed on to me.

But, as I have learned from my children, in our kind of world it is no longer so easy to tell the same old stories. The kind of stories we Catholics once told are harder and harder for our children, indeed for many adults, to hear. They seem to answer questions no one is asking, to make points no one is raising. What is suffering all about? What about good works and their connection to grace? In his book *The Search for God at Harvard*, Ari Goldman reflects on his Ortho-

dox Jewish upbringing and the obligation to say b'rachas (prayers). He talks about his mother's being on b'rachas patrol, "making sure that nothing would pass my lips without thanks to the Almighty properly expressed. After she gave me a cookie, she would watch closely for the mumble."³

By analogy my mother might be said to have been on purgatory patrol. I would go to the dentist and my mother would say, "Offer it up for the poor souls in purgatory." Well, where is purgatory now? And the poor souls? And what has become of actual grace? The old stories and familiar injunctions no longer have the cogency they once did, but neither have we fully elaborated new ones.

NEW STORIES?

Over the past 25 years, we have been striving to tell new stories that will account for the seismic shift that had been building in our culture and society over centuries but that the Church only fully acknowledged during the papacy of John XXIII. This shift required us to refocus our attention and devise new explanations about the connection between the Church and the world. We did not always see that connection as we see it now.

In 1832 Pope Gregory XVI denounced as madness "that absurd and erroneous maxim . . . that it is necessary to assure and guarantee liberty of conscience to everyone." The chair of St. Peter, he said in the same encyclical, *Mirari Vos*, was "a rampart, a sure refuge, a port amid storms."⁴ In his *Syllabus of Errors* of 1864, Pope Pius IX condemned not only rationalism, indifferentism,

Democratization of culture makes us cynical about politics, medicine, and public life.

socialism, communism, naturalism, and freemasonry, but also Bible societies, separation of church and state, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion. All these condemnations culminated in the denial that "the Roman pontiff can and ought to reconcile himself and reach agreement with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization."⁵

What a contrast in the opening lines of *Gaudium et Spes*: "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time,

especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human," the council fathers say, "fails to find an echo in [our] hearts. . . . Christians . . . cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history."⁶

We have gone from a Church that once declared the tenets of modernity anathema to a Church that has embraced modernity, particularly here in North America. We are willingly and thoroughly assimilated to its agenda and benefits. We have been habituated to its way of seeing the world. But it does not always work.

No surprise, then, that 25 years after the close of the Second Vatican Council, many people now are pausing, a little disoriented by what has happened. I do not mean those who have always seen the council as a great error, the source of all our current troubles. Nor do I mean those who express only regret about what has been lost and never appreciate what has been gained. I refer to those who greeted the council and its reforms with ready minds and willing hearts. Over the last couple of years, many of us have stepped back to take stock, to ask what has happened. Where are we now? Where are we going? Many of us frame this inquiry around questions of Catholic identity.

For example, as part of its 150th anniversary celebration, Fordham University asked leaders in education, social welfare, and healthcare such questions as: What will ensure the Catholic identity of your institution? Juridical control? The culture of the institution itself? Ministries rooted in the local Church? What would be the rationales

for your institutional ministries if the majority of your clients were non-Catholic? If the majority of your providers were non-Catholic? These are questions of grave concern to Catholic institutions—and, frankly, to the local community as well.

How would Catholic healthcare providers answer those questions? What stories can they now tell about their institutions? What will make them Catholic when religious orders, nuns, and priests are no longer visibly present? In what sense do they have a mission that marks them as bearers of the Catholic tradition? A moral tradition? Refusal to perform abortions or a commitment to social justice are critically important measures of Catholic identity, but they are only a part of what needs measuring.

Other issues need attention as well. How does the Catholic tradition respond to the challenges that modernity poses to questions about limits? About death? About the allocation of resources? About the responsibilities of the individual? About the rights of the community? About the relation between the individual and the community?

We have happily given up Pope Gregory's image of the chair of Peter as rampart and sure refuge. But have we also lost confidence that we have a tradition, a story, an alternate view of reality that has validity and standing in the modern world? Do Jesus' teachings and his continuing presence in our community have a meaning even in what so many imagine is this nearly perfect world of North America? What about the story? What about the place in the forest, the prayer, and the fire?

Though many of us grew up in a Church still shaped by Gregory, a Church geared to contest with the modern age, Americans and Canadians, living on the creative edge of this era, also knew there was a lot to be said for the achievements of modernity, like separation of church and state, religious tolerance, political liberty, racial and ethnic equality, women's rights, and scientific advances. Catholics in Canada and the United States have gladly embraced the achievements of modernity in part because we have so widely benefited from its technological achievements, its economic advantages, and its political freedoms.

Yet we know the hallmarks of modernity—science, technology, our economy and political systems—have themselves become increasingly complex. They threaten to overwhelm our capacities to understand and control them. Are they running us? Our appreciation for modernity, like our appreciation for the post-Vatican II Church, has become tempered by what we might call its "iatrogenic" effects, that is, the disabilities or dissonances produced by the systems themselves.

THE MODERN AGENDA

In this regard, three elements of the modern agenda need reassessment.

Democratization of Politics and Culture First, the democratization of politics and culture has the good effect of allowing everyone a say. But one of its iatrogenic effects is a culture and politics that in the United States, at least, increasingly raise an enormous number of frustrating and seemingly intractable new problems. When everybody gets a say and all of us hustle for our own interests, nobody has the authority to get things done, to resolve the inherent conflicts and contradictions of individual interests. From the democratization of politics and culture, we have gone to the individualization of politics and culture.

Medicine and healthcare are beset by such problems. Individuals count and individual interests count—and they should. In response to increasing costs, commissions review medical care and establish reimbursement rates. Federal review procedures exist for experimentation and testing of new drugs. Medical consumer groups, insurance companies, groups representing physicians and nurses, unions representing healthcare workers, and associations of hospitals like the Catholic Health Association work for various interests. And when all else fails, as inevitably it must from time to time, disgruntled patients bring malpractice suits, whose monetary awards ripple back into the whole system in the form of preventive tests, second opinions, higher costs for routine procedures, and unnecessary procedures. Much of this is done in the interest of giving individuals a fair shake in the medical care system, yet because of increased costs, more and more individuals are being pushed out of the healthcare system altogether.

The democratization of culture—though it empowers people and, in theory, ought to foster responsibility and participation—seems, in fact, to end in something else. It makes too many of us cynical about politics, medicine, and public life. In the public sphere people tend to mistrust, suspect, deride, and satirize. Nothing is taken at face value; persons are not trusted to do what they say they will do. In the United States, where at least 90 percent of the population say they believe in God, nothing is sacred.

Change Change and change for the better is another tenet of modernity. Our personal and communal experience is that with change comes progress. Why tolerate cholera outbreaks when you can lay sewer pipes? Why not go for the ultimate and risky medical treatment? Why not try two liver transplants in a desperately ill child? Efforts to limit, control, or ration these procedures quickly run up against an impulse to sus-

pect any exclusionary criteria.

The difficulty of setting limits is one set of problems that progress has brought. Another set of problems involves how persons can refuse medical care when they have had enough. Who can doubt, as a *New York Times* article explains, that "the push toward active euthanasia is fueled by medicine's continuing reluctance to stop treatment at an

appropriate time and to provide dignified care instead?"⁷

But the modern agenda does not acknowledge limits. Given its presuppositions and its achievements, how can it speak of biological limits, human limits, personal and communal limits, and limits to resources, to stamina, to endurance? We overwhelm ourselves, the natural world, and human society by our constant efforts to exceed those limits.

Ability to Cope The third and final element is that our ability to cope with the challenges of modernity, to think critically about them, is severely restricted by the diminishment of the religious domain. One of the achievements of modernity is the separation of church and state and the growth of religious tolerance; another is the demystification of nature and the advance of science. In a world still beset by religious and tribal wars, we can see the great value of this. But we have also lost something, particularly as religious people: We have lost a public and pervasive explanation of how the world works, and along with this a sense of communal responsibility and common values. And we are losing a sense of how each of us ought personally to order our lives. The dismissal of the transcendent and the loss of the sense of the holy in nature and in humankind have made commodities of nature's bounty.

In the privatized, interiorized, and voluntary nature of religious belief, we see the loss of a powerful, alternative view of how the world works. Of course, as individuals we find in the beliefs and practices of our religious traditions meanings that we could personally describe as alternatives to those meanings which dominate the public sphere. These deeper understandings of purpose in the universe, of the goodness and limits of creation and human life, are alternatives that become harder and harder to voice in public

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life. They increasingly give way as grounds on which we might appeal to common values.

Nor has the turn to ethics and the development of bioethics successfully bridged this gap between technology, medical advances, and human limits. Bioethics is a useful methodology for analyzing the elements and options among which people will choose, but it has not been helpful as a means for measuring

better and worse alternatives for society as a whole. In its insidious way the market drives out those who want to draw limits. If Dr. Smith won't do it, someone else will.

In all of this is a faint echo of the predicament poignantly described in *Gaudium et Spes*:

The dichotomy of a world that is at once powerful and weak, capable of doing what is noble and what is base, disposed to freedom and slavery, progress and decline, brotherhood and hatred. Men and women are growing conscious that the forces we have unleashed are in our own hands and that it is up to us to control them or be enslaved by them. Here lies the modern dilemma.⁸

THE HUMAN DIMENSION

Buried in these conundrums of modernity, we can see again Havel's eschatology of the impersonal—the disregard of human purpose in politics, the loss of the human dimension in economic and cultural life, the diminishment of the human person in the very technologizing and rationalizing processes devised to improve the human condition.

What he is saying is this: The great achievements of modernity bring in their wake a kind of totalitarianism of the mind and imagination. The very successes of scientific advances in medicine overshadow and even obliterate alternative understandings of sickness, suffering, biological limits, and the nature of the human person—alternatives in which our Catholic tradition is rich, but about which we seem so reluctant to speak.

Catholic tradition ought to counterpoint these conundrums of modernity. Catholic institutions ought to provide alternative ways of thinking and imagining what it is to be human.

"What is man?" asks *Gaudium et Spes* in its prefeminist, sexist language. "What is the meaning of suffering, evil, death, which have not been eliminated by all this progress? What is the purpose of these achievements, purchased at so high a price? What can men and women contribute to society? What can we expect from it? What happens after this earthly life is ended?"⁹

Let me return to Havel:

It seems to me that all of us, East and West, face one fundamental task from which all else should follow. That task is one of resisting vigilantly, thoughtfully and attentively, but at the same time with total dedication, at every step and everywhere, the irrational moment of anonymous, impersonal, and inhuman power—the power of ideologies, systems, apparatus, bureaucracy, artificial languages and political slogans. We must resist their complex and wholly alienating pressure, whether it take the form of consumption, advertising, repression, technology, or clichés—all of which are the blood brothers of fanaticism and the wellspring of totalitarian thought.¹⁰

Of course, what Havel and the Czechs faced, what the Poles and the East Germans, the Bulgarians and Romanians had to contend with was different from our current situation. We do not live in a totalitarian society, certainly not of that kind. But the reach of the modern agenda and the choices it brings, the way it habituates us to see and think about those choices and their consequences, all of this has a way of filling our horizons: our spatial ones—for this is a global phenomenon—as well as our intellectual and imaginative ones.

The Czechs and other Eastern Europeans were habituated by fear and oppression to a kind of hopelessness about their condition. In an analogous way, we are habituated by technology and progress to a kind of blind optimism and cheerfulness about our own condition. What can we do? Some, of course, would ask, Why should we do anything? More technology, more medical advances, better bureaucratic systems, better public policy will solve our problems. Perhaps they will help. But we are blind if we do not see that what helps also hinders, what cures one problem creates another.

Finally, we must ask if we are running our systems or they are running us. The real question is, as Havel wrote:

whether we shall . . . succeed in reconstituting the natural world as the true terrain

of politics, rehabilitating the personal experience of human beings as the initial measure of things, placing morality above politics and responsibility above our desires, in making human community meaningful, in returning content to human speaking, in reconstituting, as the focus of all social action, the autonomous, integral and dignified human I, responsible for ourself because we are bound to something higher, and capable of sacrificing something, in extreme cases even everything, of our banal, prosperous private life . . . for the sake of that which gives life meaning.¹¹

OUR CATHOLIC IDENTITY

Isn't part of our own Catholic identity to be found and preserved exactly in what Havel has outlined? Whether as parishes, hospitals, individuals, or small communities, we find and save ourselves neither in uncritical accommodation to the world, nor in withdrawal from it, neither in condemnation of it, nor in wringing our hands over our own mistakes and inadequacies. We find and save ourselves by telling our story. We do have alternative ways of thinking and imagining that can serve as an alternative to the sometimes heedless agenda of modernity. We do have institutions that can embody other ways of doing things and foster other kinds of conversations than those which dominate our culture. What else can it mean that we are an incarnational Church? Or that we "cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history"?

"Hope," to return again to Havel, is "a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't. . . . [Hope] is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." □

NOTES

1. Vaclav Havel, Paul Wilson, trans., *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York City, 1990, pp. 180-181.
2. Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest*, Avon Books, New York City, 1966, preface.
3. Ari Goldman, *The Search for God at Harvard*, Times Books, New York City, 1991.
4. Pope Gregory XVI, *Mirari Vos*, para. 14.
5. Pope Pius IX, *Quanta Cura*.
6. *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 1.
7. "Beliefs," *New York Times*, May 11, 1991.
8. *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 9.
9. *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 10.
10. Vaclav Havel, *Living in Truth*, Faber & Faber, Winchester, MA, 1986, p. 153.
11. *Living in Truth*, p. 150.