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Edward B. Hanify

A practicing attorney, former president of the New England Law Institute and chairman of the Human Life Foundation, Mr. Hanify gave the following address at the 1978 meeting of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds in New Orleans.

Some time ago a gracious and most perceptive lady, now well into her 100th year, sent me a copy of a newspaper column which suggested my topic: "The Contagion of Irreverence." My correspondent had been 21 when the 20th century came in. She was now living in its last quarter. She was appalled by a column of Art Buchwald. A spokesman for Consolidated Edison had attributed a recent blackout in its service area to "an act of God." Buchwald found this explanation vastly amusing. On an imaginary visit to Con Ed's headquarters, he had a dialogue with the receptionist. God struck the whole Con Ed territory, she explained, because He could not just black out His intended targets—porno shops, X-rated movies, adulterous love-nests. "Even the Lord cannot smash one of our circuits without putting the others out of commission," said Buchwald's Con Ed spokesman.

Now Buchwald, on his own, is hardly worth much attention. The attitude of his column, however, is symptomatic of much one encounters today in the contemporary attitude toward the Creator and the Redeemer of mankind. In the Buchwald-type caricature, God is a cosmic bumbler Who can't stamp out Sodom and Gomorrah without blighting a whole adjoining area.

Lenin, who hated God, resolved "to remove" Him from the minds of man. Hundreds of millions live under regimes now dedicated to this effort. Meanwhile, in the West, the traditional bastion of Christian civilization, reverence for the Deity is diminishing. It is not that God is
to be destroyed. It is that He is to be mocked. The contagion of irreverence is spreading all around us in blasphemy too frequent to catalogue. Thus, newspapers in our major cities advertised in big, black letters a new movie, "Oh, God!", with this commentary:

"Oh, God, is it funny!"
"The divine engagement of 'Oh, God'"
"God announces a special preview, tonight at 8 p.m. Be on time."

The dignity of the recent conclave which elected Pope John Paul I generally received the respectful media attention it so truly deserved. However, this moving spiritual epoch in the history of the Roman Catholic Church was subjected to irreverent treatment, sadly enough, from the priest Andrew Greeley, who covered the conclave for Universal Press Syndicate. His column, printed on September 17th under a heading in the Boston Globe, "Agreeing on a Pope. The politics would have impressed Richard Daley," commenced as follows:

Vatican City. The surprise election of a virtually unknown Cardinal as Pope John Paul I in one of the shortest conclaves ever was the result of as slick a political exercise as this century has ever seen.

Taking off from this lead sentence, the column went on, ad nauseam, constructing on the sheerest speculation and conjecture a picture of the conclave as an example of crafty political manipulation. The combined meanness and irreverence of this effort is shocking because the priest who wrote the column must know full well that the Cardinal participants in the conclave, who are the only persons in a position to repudiate this unverified account of its tenor, can do so only by engaging in undignified controversy with a minor minion of the media, as well as risking a violation of their oaths of secrecy.

Recently, the contagion of irreverence reached the low level of an outrageous affront to Christian sensibilities when the pastor of a Catholic parish in a midwestern city is reported by the National Catholic News Service to have invited abortion advocate Gloria Steinem to give the homily at two Sunday Masses, making it necessary for his Ordinary to issue a public apology to the people of the diocese. The dismal drivel of the Steinem homily does not warrant taking your time with repetition. The contagion of irreverence in this instance has a bizarre, sickly, disgusting set of symptoms — too offensive to dwell upon.

What is the general blight wrought by this epidemic of contagious irreverence, a few of whose symptoms I have cited?

First of all, let us recall that all human authority in the world ultimately comes from God! So parental authority in the home comes from God. Before the Founder of Christianity opened His lips to preach, before He gathered His disciples, before He performed a miracle, He lived in a home and was subject to the authority of the
first Christian family. The evangelist Luke is very clear: "He was subject to Joseph and Mary." What stronger evidence could Christ have given of His emphasis on respect for authority in the home!

**Preoccupation with Family Disintegration**

There is enormous preoccupation today with the disintegration of the family. One does not have to be a sociologist to know that the root of the problem is the destruction of parental authority. That, in turn, results from the contagion of irreverence for God. Where there is reverence for God shown by the parent, respect for parental authority by the child has at least a reasonable chance of prevailing. If respect for parental authority is eroded in our day, how much of the erosion results from the contagion of irreverence for the Deity? There is a poignant incident in the life of the great Samuel Johnson. I set it before you in his own words:

I beg your pardon for the abruptness of my departure in the morning, but I was compelled to it by conscience. Fifty years ago, on this day I committed a breach of filial piety. My father had been in the habit of attending Uttoxeter market, and opening a stall there for the sale of his books. Con fined by indisposition he desired me, that day, to go and attend the stall in his place. My pride prevented me; I gave my father a refusal. And now, today, I have been at Uttoxeter. I went into the market at the time of business, uncovered my head, and stood with it bare for an hour on the spot where my father’s stall used to stand. In contrition, I stood, and I hope the penance was expiatory.

"In contrition, I stood, and I hope the penance was expiatory."

There you have my whole thesis in a capsule! This great literary figure expiates before God and man a breach of filial love and obedience 50 years after the event! No man without reverence for God thus treats a breach of duty to parent!

All public authority ultimately comes from God. “The State,” wrote Edmund Burke, “is consecrated,” and he added:

This consecration is made that all who administer in the government of men, in which they stand in the person of God Himself, should have high and worthy notions of their functions and destination; that their hope should be full of immortality; that they should not look to the paltry pelf of the moment, nor to the temporary and transient praise of the vulgar, but to a solid, permanent existence, in the permanent part of their nature, and to a permanent fame and glory, in the example they leave as a rich inheritance to the world.

The story is told that when Alfred E. Smith was governor of New York, he was prevailed upon to make an appearance at a convention dinner. He discovered when he arrived that the predominantly out-of-state audience had a sort of supercilious, condescending, semi-inebriated interest in him as an amusing personality, and his quick insight was verified when the toastmaster gave him a flippant, jocose introduction, climaxed by the phrase—“And now boys, I present a great guy, Al Smith.”
Governor Smith was the last man in the world to insist on idle ceremony or empty formality, but on this occasion he sensed the affront to his office and his heritage, and made his point briefly and tersely.

He said, "Gentlemen, when I was a little boy on the East Side, my father took me to see a great civic parade. I held his hand tightly as battalion after battalion of marching infantry came by. I danced up and down to the martial music. Then suddenly my father stiffened. I almost felt a tingling pride thrill his being. Swiftly he said, 'Son take off your hat, the Governor of New York is passing by!' I took off my hat. Gentlemen, the Governor of New York bids you goodnight!' And with that, the happy warrior left a stunned banquet hall to contemplate the proper respect due the office of chief executive of one of the united states of America.

That proper respect due to government and public officers is based upon that fundamental proposition of Burke: "All who administer in the government of men... stand in the person of God Himself." The contagion of irreverence for God contributes to our current disrespect for public authority, just as certainly as does the failure of many public officials to recognize that the ultimate source of their authority is God Himself.

Governor Smith's insistence on the respect due his high office has a nostalgic flavor in our egalitarian day when titles and symbols of reverence and respect in dress and manner have lost some of their venerable appeal. I recall the lawyer-son of a distinguished chief justice of Massachusetts telling me that, when as a small boy he accompanied his father to the polling place in the cold dawn of a western Massachusetts winter, his father bared his head as he entered the voting precinct, carefully pointing out to his son that he did so in respect for the solemn God-given prerogative of the suffrage of a free man which he was about to exercise. I remember, in the depths of the textile depression in the 20's in my native city, Fall River, youngsters attending the public high school from every home, including the homes of unemployed textile workers, were properly attired, the boys with coat and tie, respectful of the educational environment which, in many cases, they were the first generation to enjoy. I contrast this with the slovenly, coatless, tieless slouch of those now privileged to attend college and graduate school. "Symbols," one may say, "What have they to do with essences?" I respectfully suggest that eroding symbols may well be symptoms of a vanishing reference.

**Significance of Symbols**

Symbols had their significance. We placed a black robe on the lawyer when he ascended the bench and called him "Your Honor," that we might preserve our own. Was there ever a symbol more meaningful than the white Roman collar and the priest's dark clerical suit as
he walked about the parish neighborhood? They were signs of a dedicated celibacy which meant that his title, "Father," signified an all-embracing, spiritual paternity no layman could claim. So, with the nun in the particular distinctive habit of her religious order, the title, "Mother" or "Sister," connoted a special spiritual, maternal or sororal love, unique and precious, freely given and reciprocated by her alone. And so with the family doctor, with his worn black bag, entering the household where the family of the afflicted habitually greeted him with the respect due to one participating in the divine mission of healing and preserving life.

All of these titles and symbols of respect were cherished in an America whose basic public philosophy was reverence for the Deity. Our Declaration of Independence affirmed the cardinal precept of the natural moral law — man was a creature of God. His inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were an endowment from his Creator. Our founders appealed to "the Supreme Judge of the World for the rectitude of their intentions." For the support of the declaration they expressed "firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence."

Nearly four decades ago in a famous address, "Education vs. Western Civilization," Walter Lippmann pointed out that our world was made in this reverent tradition of the natural moral law which he described as "the great central religious tradition of Western civilization." That philosophy involved recognition of an infinite personal Creator, the source of man's inalienable rights and of moral obligation, principles of law and justice which transcend all human positive laws and which have their basis in God; human nature properly understood in its created rational and social essence as the measure, in some sense, of the immutable principles of right and wrong.

In the same address, Lippmann asserted that American education was excluding this moral law tradition from its instruction and its influence. "Modern education," he said, "rejects and excludes from the curriculum of necessary studies the whole religious tradition of the West." The consequences, he predicted, would be tragic. He warned: "Without this tradition, our world like a tree cut off from its roots in the soil, must die and be replaced by alien and barbarous things."

In June of 1978, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, at the Harvard commencement, described the reality which Lippmann had prophesied. Solzhenitsyn became an anti-hero to the "liberal" clique when he traced what he described as the moral poverty of the 20th Century and attributed it to "the total liberation from the moral heritage of the Christian centuries," and the abandonment of the doctrine which Solzhenitsyn declared gave birth to American democracy: "All individual human rights were granted because man is God's creature."

We now have the "alien and barbarous things" of Lippmann's
prophecy, particularly as a consequence of the abortion decisions of the United States Supreme Court. Abortion represents the ultimate blasphemy. We think of abortion as deprivation of the right to life of human beings. Let us keep steadily in mind that abortion is also a hideous and impious invasion and attempted frustration of the creative act of God Himself which is now being deliberately repeated on a global scale of an estimated 40 million abortions annually. Abortion is the awful nadir and the blackest blight of irreverence.

Fear of God’s Wrath

Some political figures have recently attempted to demean the abortion issue by describing it as “emotional.” Forty million abortions a year in this world ought to inspire “emotion” — the emotion of a wholesome fear of the wrath of God.

How did it come about that the chief oracles of the legal profession, the Justices of the United States Supreme Court, succumbed to the contagion of irreverence, and placed in the hands of those members of the medical profession, who were equally estranged from their ancient moral law tradition, the legal means of destroying innocent human life?

In my view, Walter Lippmann correctly diagnosed the root cause of the contagion of irreverence for the moral law in modern jurisprudence. It was the calculated exclusion of that tradition from the educational process. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes was the idol of our law school student days. To Justice Felix Frankfurter, he was “Plato’s philosopher become king.” Holmes it was who defined truth “as the majority vote of the nation that can lick all the others”; “right” as an empty substratum, “the hypostasis of a prophecy”; “morality” as a “check on the ultimate dominion of force.” It was Holmes who wondered, “if cosmically an idea is any more important than the bowels.” As to the right to life grounded in the natural law, Holmes had the following observation: “The most fundamental of the supposed pre-existing rights — the right to life — is sacrificed without scruple not only in war, but whenever the interest of society, that is of the predominant power in the community, is thought to demand it.”

Naturally, law professors, who regarded Justice Holmes as their hero, winced or sneered when the common law inevitably displayed its moral law inheritance on occasion as in the survival of the distinction in the law of crimes between conduct which was “malum prohibitum” and “malum in se.” However, in fairness to Holmes, it should be said that he had sufficient regard for the importance of state governments in our federal system, that it is doubtful that he would have gone to the present extreme position of some of his successors in depriving state legislatures of the power either to protect unborn life, or even to
insure parental and spousal participation in the abortion decision.

Since the era of Holmes' ascendancy there came the Humanist Manifestos of 1933 and 1973, formally and publicly subscribed to by those who represented enormous resources in finance, education, business, sociology and government. Those manifestos specifically repudiated "faith in the prayer-hearing God, assumed to love and care for persons" as "unproved and outmoded faith." They called for an aggressive program in the domain of public policy which would eliminate all traditional restraints on sexual behavior between consenting adults, and insure the availability of abortion, birth prevention, euthanasia and the right to suicide. Rejection of the precepts of the natural moral law now moved from the classroom and the study to become a monopolistic general public policy. This transition could not be accomplished by popular mandate. So it was accomplished by the judicial fiat of relatively few judges who had been intellectually conditioned for the acceptance of the tenets of the Humanist Manifestos because of a half-century of neglect or repudiation of the moral law tradition in our jurisprudence. That, at least in my judgment, is how we came to be where we are. We take the lives of the unborn, not because our people voted for the carnage, but because in Holmes' phrase "the predominant power in the community was thought to demand it."

This diagnosis of the epidemic contagion of irreverence, if it be valid, has this additional significance: it underscores the practical reality that even a great tradition and a noble truth can lose their beneficent influence on mankind if they are not faithfully and steadfastly taught and upheld. Thus, more recently the same desertion of the moral law tradition occurred in the reception and treatment of the encyclical Humanae Vitae of our late Pope Paul VI. That document gave Western civilization a last chance to save itself from the fatal social consequences of the contagion of irreverence by its insistence on reverence and respect for human life, its inviolate dignity in transmission and preservation, and the ascendancy of man's rationality and capacity for unselfish love and self-sacrifice in exercising the intrinsically sacred privileges and prerogatives of married life. The strident opposition with which this encyclical was greeted within our Church, and the palpable neglect of the widespread teaching of its precepts, in the face of the Pope's plea for illumination of its teaching, is a tragedy from which we will long suffer as Catholics and as Americans. Doubtless, this phenomenon made a practical contribution to the state of mind which produced the abortion decisions of the United States Supreme Court. When the Supreme Court of the United States, prior to the abortion decision, held unconstitutional the laws of Massachusetts which banned the sale or distribution of contraceptives to the unmarried, Justice Brennan carefully planted the seed of the later abortion decisions in his opinion, using this language: "If the right of

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privacy means anything it is the right of the individual, married or single, to be free from unwarranted governmental intrusion into matters so fundamentally affecting a person as the decision whether to bear or beget a child.” “Bearing” a child is a term which is not equivalent to “begetter” a child; so the Justice was reaching out in a case involving contraception to use language encompassing childbearing as well as conception; language which could be cited as precedent for the later abortion decisions. In law as well as in morals, artificial contraception has been the nose of the abortion camel sliding into the tent.

Artificial Contraception and Abortion

The close relationship between artificial contraception and abortion was outlined in an address which Dr. Carl Djerassi, inventor with his associates of the first oral contraceptive, gave at the May, 1978 meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Dr. Djerassi stated:

In medical terms one could say that contraception is equivalent to preventive medicine and abortion to curative medicine—if one equated an unwanted pregnancy with disease.

The doctrine that sex is a pure pleasure mechanism to be indulged in or outside marriage with its procreative function subverted by artificial birth prevention, or, if that fails, by the extinction of the unborn, was the readily available humanist alternative to Humanae Vitae. In a pleasure-loving civilization, disdaining sacrifice and self-discipline, that alternative had widespread popular appeal. Only a widespread and careful illumination of the doctrine of Humanae Vitae and its underlying premises could and can eliminate acceptance of the distortion of its tenets and reasoning which one finds persisting in recent columns of Mary McGrory and Garry Wills.

Gilbert K. Chesterton decades ago described the avant garde theologians and columnists who found in the recent death of Pope Paul and the election of his successor, an occasion for renewed demands for the election of a Pope who would approve the pill.

Chesterton wrote: “It has been left to the last Christians or rather to the first Christians fully committed to blaspheming and denying Christianity to invent a new kind of worship of sex, which is not even a worship of life. It has been left to the very latest modernists to proclaim an erotic religion which at once exalts lust and forbids fertility. The new paganism literally merits the reproach of Swinburne when mourning for the old paganism, ‘and rears not the bountiful token and spreads not the fatherly feast.’ The new pagans abolish the fatherhood and keep the feast to themselves. They are worse than Swinburne’s pagans.”

What is the solution for the spread of the contagion of irreverence?
First, and obviously, it includes the preservation of organizations like this where those loyal to the natural moral law tradition may preserve and pass down its saving heritage. What was once the glorious beacon of our country, reverence for God and His moral law, is now a tiny and flickering candle which will be totally extinguished unless those who tender its flame are tireless, vigilant and indomitable.

Because the primary moral problems of our day involve the application of correct principles to very complex medical and scientific data, it is essential that there exists a group of competent practitioners of the ancient art and science of medicine which can insure that the basic scientific facts on which judicial decisions, legislative action, medical and hospital practices are based are presented free from distortion and concealment.

Next, we should face the reality that in American public life at the moment, the only political enterprise which is resisting the contagion of irreverence for life is the so-called Right to Life Movement. From time to time, the individual personalities and tactics of those in this effort may cause one concern. However, the repair of a massive constitutional monstrosity is an enormous task, so complex that it invites confusion and dissent even among the best friends of the effort. I am suggesting not blind adherence to every strategy or tactic of the Right to Life Movement, but the recognition that it is the only existing force operating in the political sphere to prevent complete capitulation to humanistic hedonism in the treatment of human life. The successful defenders of a three-inch fish known as the "snail darter" ought not to be the only forces reckoned with by Congress or state legislatures or the courts. The advocates of the innocent unborn must be heard in these same places. Therefore, to the extent thoughtful and competent men and women enter the ranks of the Right to Life Movement, the more likely it is that the effort will avoid aberrations and remain on course.

The Right to Life Movement must be preserved from the control or domination of the advocates of artificial contraception as an alternative to abortion.

Then in the moral and spiritual order, there is the Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. To the extent intelligent and dedicated lay men and women can help implement this plan on the parish level, to the same extent they will have the satisfaction of playing an effective role in stemming the contagion of irreverence. They will not be passive spectators, wringing their hands as the contagion spreads. The Church in America was not built by a whining race of whey faces. It needs a resurgence of what was once proudly called "the Church Militant" to restore its moral influence from the unhappy state described in Professor James Hitchcock's important essay, "On the Present Position of Catholics in America."
Solution for Contagion of Irreverence

Finally, there is the basic and ultimate solution for the spread of the contagion of irreverence. The psalmist gave it long, long ago: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

An age which may be presumptuous in its reliance on the mercy of God needs a wholesome infusion of a fear of the justice of God. It has been well said that a complete disjunction between fear and love is not well founded: we fear to lose that which we truly love. Fear of God may well be inspired by love of God as our Supreme Good, Whom we fear to lose.

Christ, the Gentle Savior, may also inspire a wholesome fear. The theater and media of our day have tried to reduce the Lord to a benign symbol of happy tolerance of aberration, yes, of sin itself. It might be well to halt the contagion of irreverence by contemplating the occasions when a vigorous, virile Savior became indignant or angry. He became indignant when the disciples tried to brush off, as it were, parents bringing youngsters for His blessing. He then said: Suffer the little children to come unto me and see to it that you send them not away, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as are like to them.

On another occasion, He placed a little child in the midst of His disciples and said: And whoever receives one such little child for my sake receives me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it were better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

One can think of myriad applications of that stern warning to the anti-child or child-debauchery forces in our society—even to the intellectuals who delight in teaching young boys and girls to sneer at the Christianity of their parents without ever fairly presenting the evidence which supports its claim to divine origin and authority. Should not this awesome warning also have some application to those college trustees and administrators who permit parietal practices which erode any ideals of chastity, which young people may have learned at home, and also to the dim-witted clergymen who condone pre-marital sex?

Scriptural scholars tell us that Christ was angry, righteously angry, on the very week in which He was crucified. On Monday of that week, the Savior cursed the barren fig tree. Covered with foliage and flowers, it bore no fruit when Christ approached it. “May no one ever eat fruit of thee henceforward forever.” The tree withered up. In this parable in action was the cursed tree a symbol of a civilization where healthy young couples deliberately make themselves barren and sterile so that they may enjoy themselves without the burden of children? Could it be a symbol of a country that subsidizes farmers not to produce their
wheat or grain while a substantial portion of the world starves? Could it be a symbol of a country which has spent two billion dollars in the last decade exporting birth prevention, abortion and sterilization to the underprivileged of the world?

On Tuesday of the week of the Crucifixion, Christ became angry at the irreverence of those who showed disrespect to His Father’s house. He overturned the desks of the money changers, and the seats of those who sold the doves. He cast out those who were buying and selling in the temple.

That same week an angry Christ delivered the seven searing maledictions on the Scribes and Pharisees. There was nothing soft or diplomatic about that seven count indictment, each count which begins “Woe to you”—and promises woe especially to the hypocrites, whitened sepulchers, beautiful without, “whereas within they are full of bones and rottenness.”

The contagion of irreverence might have a quick and devastating end if contemporary man, instead of fancying himself as having possibly to deal only with a good-natured, somewhat soft personality in the clown costume of “Godspell,” took a fresh look at the Son of Man in Michaelangelo’s “Last Judgment.” Having separated the sheep from the goats, and welcomed the good to the Kingdom of His Father, His strong arm is raised in an irrevocable gesture of banishment, as He says, “Depart from me, accursed, into everlasting fire prepared for Satan and his angels.”

Modern man needs to know the tender and compassionate Christ. He also needs to know the indignant and angry Christ. For God, Who is all perfect, is both all-merciful and all-just! In the reverence of His name and in the respect for His moral law we may find the cure for the contagion of irreverence which unchecked will destroy Western civilization.