

## Critical Thinking in an Age of Volatility

I will hazard to assert that we seem to live in an age wherein many or most people are all-too easily offended. It is, truly, hazardous for me to make this assertion because it is beyond my powers to be the arbiter of what is truly offensive and what is not. But, I think it is possible to hone in on the issue when it is a failure of critical thinking . . . a failure to make proper distinctions, or to properly parse the terms in play.

Recently we showed an eight-minute video clip of Bishop Robert Barron making a case for fighting rather than fleeing in the context of the clergy sex-abuse crisis. He appealed to the example of Abraham Lincoln in the crisis which was the Civil War. I was astonished to learn that some people were offended by the video because they took it as a comparison between the evil of slavery and the evil of child-sexual-abuse. This, I think, is a regrettable misunderstanding of the Bishop's argument:

Consider that he began his remarks by placing the notion of "fighting" for the church over-against "leaving" her. These terms are the interpretive keys or the reference points for properly understanding the rest of his analogy. He was not comparing the two evils of slavery and child-sexual-abuse; rather, he was comparing responses. Lincoln, or any other mid-19<sup>th</sup> century American, could have thrown up their arms and given up on the American experiment because of the "cancer" of slavery. Instead, Lincoln committed the citizenry to fight to save the Union and the whole idea of America itself. Likewise, Barron suggests that the better response to the Church's crisis is for the faithful to fight for the truth of her identity.

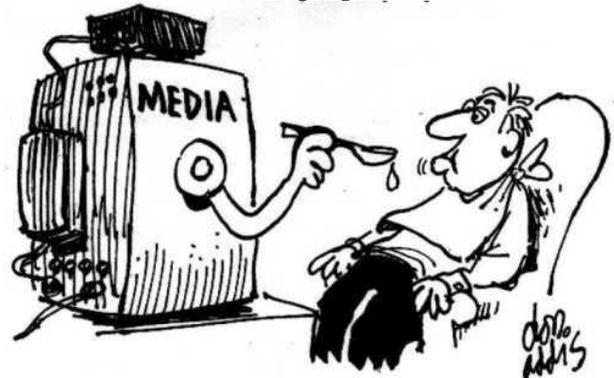
There is no comparison between slavery and childhood-sexual-abuse! One would be a fool to argue which was more evil since, among other things, one can assume that the institution of slavery likely contained within itself sexual abuse of the enslaved. Bishop Barron was not comparing the two.

My point is not to defend the good Bishop, but to exhort one-and-all to be dedicated to using our God given minds for the rationality built into their design. This is crucial in an age of volatility,

hysteria and political polarization. We are susceptible to these phenomena when our emotions get the better of us and we project a hyper-sensitive filter out between ourselves and others. Justice and the truth are at stake in all of this. I'm reminded of the cynicism Jesus describes with respect to the contrasting receptions he and John the Baptist receive:

*"To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children who sit in marketplaces and call to one another, 'We played the flute for you, but you did not dance, we sang a dirge but you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they said, 'He is possessed by a demon. The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they said, 'Look, he is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is vindicated by her works.'" (Mt 11)*

The template of cynicism projected on those speaking prophetically renders the hearers unable to receive the truth of the prophet.



The Catechism speaks in terms of "right reason" as an endowment of God to know the true and the good:

[CCC 1954] *The natural law expresses the original moral sense which enables man to discern by reason the good and the evil, the truth and the lie.*

My purpose in writing this reflection is only to put forth a concern that traumatic events inside and outside of the Church, combined with the din of a 24 hour news cycle, render us vulnerable to wild emotional swings and the loss of critical thinking powers.