

Memory, Sex and the Making of the “New Man”

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“Some ideas are so stupid that only an intellectual could believe them.” Those words are usually attributed to George Orwell. I’m not sure he ever actually said them. But in an age when gender is supposed to be fluid and the meaning of “male” and “female” has become ambiguous, they do ring true. So let’s be clear about our purpose today.



Detail from “The Dedication” by Edmund Blair Leighton (1908).

“Into the Breach” is a men’s conference in the most thoroughly binary sense.

We’re here to recover what it means to

be men, and especially how to live as *Christian* men of substance and virtue. So we’ll try to do that together. The theme for my remarks is “memory, sex, and the making of ‘the new man’.”

I’ll deal with each of those topics in turn because they connect to each other in some important ways. But I want to start with memory for a reason.

Memory: Cornerstone of Our Identity

Romans have been living with the Catholic Church and her leaders for 2,000 years. So the city is a mix of deep piety, deep skepticism and a very unique sense of humor. The evidence is everywhere, because Rome has a lot of religious goods stores. And in one of the finest of those stores, right next to a beautiful collection of rosaries, is a stand of greeting cards with the face of a befuddled, 90-year-old cardinal. The caption reads: “Yes, I have Alzheimer’s ... but at least I don’t have Alzheimer’s.”

The ironies of old age can be a rich vein of comedy, and our culture has dozens of Alzheimer’s jokes. And some of them are very funny. But of course, the *reality* of Alzheimer’s isn’t funny at all. A number of my friends have children with Down syndrome. One of the things they live with every day is the fact that 75 percent of persons with Down syndrome will sooner or later develop Alzheimer’s disease. So the child they nourish and love today, and tomorrow, and forever, may one day forget who they are.

That's a fierce kind of suffering. And some of the men in this room know exactly what I mean because you have a parent or spouse or sibling or friend who's struggling right now with the same disease. Loving a person with Alzheimer's is like watching that person, and everything you've shared together, slowly disappear.

Toward the end of the original *Blade Runner* movie, Ridley Scott's great science-fiction film, a dying android, as his life slips away, grieves that all of his astonishing experiences, all of his memories and their meaning, will be "lost in time like tears in rain." It's a haunting line, because androids are machines. They have no soul; no yearning for eternity or anxiety about the unknown. But humans do, which is why our very human fear of death, of losing the past and all we've seen and loved, can be so poignant and intense.

That's the anguish every person feels in the presence of Alzheimer's. Memory is a cornerstone of our identity. It's the storehouse of everything we've learned, all of our love, all of our experiences, and all of their meaning. Memory gives the storyline to our lives. It shapes how we understand the world and approach the future. So when we lose our memory, we become a kind of non-person. We lose part of our substance. And that means that other people have the power to tell us who we are and what our lives mean—whether they're speaking the truth or not.

So where am I going with this?

Just as memory anchors each person's individual story, history plays the same role for cultures, nations and communities of faith. History is our shared memory. When we Christians lose a strong grasp of our own history—our own unique story and identity—others will gladly offer us a revised version of all three—a version that suits their own goals and bigotries, and not necessarily the truth. And then some very ugly things can happen. A community dies when its memory fails. So our memory as a Christian people matters. And I want to recall one particular piece of our history as Christian men, because it speaks to us right here, today.

Exactly 900 years ago, in A.D. 1118-19, a small group of men came together in Jerusalem to form a religious community. They were pilgrims. The First Crusade had retaken the city from Muslim rule in 1099. The men, who were all from Europe's knightly order, had come looking for a life of common prayer and service. They got both, but not in the way they intended.

As warriors, the men had skills. As knights, they came from respected families with important connections. The roads leading to Jerusalem and other holy sites were infested with brigands and Muslim raiders that would rob, rape, murder or abduct many of those making the journey. The Christian rulers of the city needed help in protecting the travelers. The men had taken vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to the Patriarch of Jerusalem. And their first task, under obedience, was to patrol the roads.

They began that work with nine men too poor to afford anything more than the clothes they were given by pilgrims. Twenty years later, the Holy See approved the rule of their religious community, the Poor Brothers of the Order of the Temple of Solomon—the Knights Templar. The Templars went on to become the most effective Christian fighting force in the Holy Land for

nearly 200 years. They had dozens of recruiting and support communities throughout Europe. And they were so successful that they were finally persecuted and suppressed through the jealousy of the French king.

A lot of nonsense—some of it vindictive, some of it ridiculous, much of it just false—has been written about the Templars. If you want facts, read Malcolm Barber's *The New Knighthood: A History of the Order of the Temple*, or the work of Jonathan Riley-Smith or Thomas Madden. Or read St. Bernard of Clairvaux's great reflection on the Templars, "In Praise of the New Knighthood." But pay special attention to that expression "the new knighthood."

Knighthood in medieval Europe began as a profession of heavily armed male thugs—men obsessed with vanity, violence, and rape. It took the Church and royalty centuries to tame and channel it. But it provided the animating ideal at the core of the Templars: to build a *new* order of *new* Christian men, skilled at arms, living as brothers, committed to prayer, austerity, and chastity, and devoting themselves radically to serving the Church and her people, especially the weak. The ideal of this "new knighthood" was often ignored or betrayed. Then and now, humans are sinners—all of us. But the astounding thing is how *much more often* and how *much more fruitfully* the ideal was embraced, pursued and actually lived by the brothers, rather than abused.

My point is this. C.S. Lewis described Christianity as a "fighting religion." He meant that living the Gospel involves a very real kind of spiritual warfare; a struggle against the evil in ourselves and in the world around us. Our first weapons should always be generosity, patience, mercy, forgiveness, an eagerness to listen to and understand others, a strong personal witness of faith, and speaking the truth unambiguously with love. For the Christian, violence is always a last and unwelcome resort. It's to be used only in self-defense or in defending others. But at the same time, justice and courage are *also* key Christian virtues. And I think they have a special meaning in the life of the Christian man.

Men need a challenge. Men need to test and prove their worth. Men feel most alive when they're giving themselves to some purpose higher than their own comfort. This is why young men join the Marines or Rangers or SEALs. They do it not *despite* it being hard, but *exactly because* it's hard; because it hurts; because they want to be the best and earn a place among brothers who are also the very best. Men joined the early Capuchins and Jesuits not to escape the world but to transform it; to convert the world by demanding everything a man had—every drop of his energy, love, talent and intelligence—in service to a mission bigger and more important than any individual ego or appetite.

This is why the ideal of knighthood—despite all the videogame fantasies and freemason conspiracies that the modern world tries to attach to it—still has such a strong hold on the hearts and imaginations of men. As men, we're hardwired by nature and confirmed by the Word of God to do three main things: to provide, to protect, and to lead—not for our own sake, not for our own empty vanities and appetites, *but in service to others*.

We men—all of us, both clergy and lay—bear a special responsibility because the Gospel tasks us as leaders. That doesn't make us better than anyone else. It takes nothing away from the genius of women or the equality of women and men. But human beings are not identical units. We're not interchangeable pieces of social machinery. Christian equality is based not in political ideology but in the *reality* of the differences and mutual dependencies of real men and women. As creatures we're designed to *need* each other, not replicate each other. And this, by the way, is a key reason why modern culture is so conflicted about the body.

On the one hand—in today's good "progressive" thought—we should be free with our bodies to have as much sex as we want; with whomever we want; however we want; wherever we want; whenever we want. On the other hand, the body's a downer. It's a big disappointment. It's awkward. It gets fat. It wears out. Then it dies. It's a defective piece of equipment, and it doesn't do what my will desires. When we understand this dynamic, then things like transgenderism, transhumanism and all the other curious sexual delusions of our age start to make more sense.

Again, men are meant to lead in a uniquely *masculine* way. The great saint of the early Eastern Church, John Chrysostom, described every human father as the bishop of his family. All of you fathers here today are bishops. And every father shapes the soul of the next generation with his love, his self-mastery and his courage, or the lack of them.

In the end, protecting and building up the Gospel witness in our age is the work of God. But he works through us. The privilege and challenge of that work belong to us. So we need to ask ourselves: What do I want my life to mean? If I claim to be a believing Catholic man, can I prove it with the patterns of my life? When do I pray? How often do I seek out the Sacrament of Penance? What am I doing for the poor? How am I serving the needy? Do I really know Jesus Christ? Who am I leading to the Church? How many young people have I asked to consider a vocation? How much time do I spend sharing about God with my wife, my children and my friends? How well and how often do I listen for God's presence in my own life?

The Church has lots of good reasons why people should believe in God, and in Jesus Christ, and in the beauty and urgency of her own mission. But she has only one *irrefutable* argument for the truth of what she teaches: the personal example of her saints.

So what does that mean? It means the world needs faithful Catholic men, men with a hunger to be saints. The role of a Catholic husband and father—a man who sacrifices his own desires, out of love, to serve the needs of his wife and children—is the living cornerstone of a Christian home. The Church in this country may face a very hard road in the next 20 years, and her sons need to step up and lead by the witness of their daily lives. We need the friendship of real brothers in the Lord to be the disciples and leaders God intends us to be. And there's no better place to pursue that friendship and renew our vocation as Christian men than right here, today, in the time we spend together as brothers.

Sex and the “New Man”

Now because I made such a big deal about the importance of memory, some of you will remember that I also promised to talk about sex and the making of the “new man.” So I’ll finish with those two items.

Since most of you are familiar with those two little details called the Sixth and Ninth Commandments, I’ll mention the obvious things just briefly. *Don’t* cheat on your wife. *Don’t* put yourself in a situation where the idea would even occur to you. *Don’t* mislead and abuse women, and damage your own dignity as a man, by sleeping around before marriage. And if you’re already doing that, or did that, or you’re toying with the idea of doing it sometime in the future, *stop it, now*, and get to confession. Finally, *don’t* demean your wife, your daughters, your mother and your sisters by poisoning your imagination with porn. It steals your time and your heart from the people who need them the most—the wife and family you love. Pornography exploits and humiliates women. And it dehumanizes men at the same time. God made us to be better than that. Our families *need* us to be better than that.

Those are some of the don’ts. The dos are equally obvious. *Do* love the women in your life with the encouragement, affection, support, and reverence they deserve by right. *Do* be faithful to your wife in mind and body. *Do* show courtesy and respect to the women you meet, even when they don’t return it. Chivalry is dead only if we men cooperate in killing it—and given the vulgarity of our current national environment and its leaders, we certainly need *some* kind of new code of dignity between the sexes. Finally, those of you who marry, *do* have more children, and *do* invest your time and heart in them. America is facing a birth bust, and it’s a sign of our growing national selfishness. Children are the future. They’re the cement of love in the covenant of a husband and wife. They’re also an anchor to the imperfection and beauty of reality. They’re the single best antidote to selfishness.

Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, and all the other blots on recent male behavior are merely a symptom of an entire culture of unhinged attitudes toward sex. Women are right to be angry when men treat them like objects and act like bullies and pigs. But a real reform of male behavior will never come about through feminist lectures and mass media man-shaming by celebrities and award ceremonies. In a lot of men, that kind of hectoring will merely breed nominal repentance and inner resentment. A man’s actions and words change only when his heart changes for the better. And his heart only changes for the better when he discovers something to believe in that transforms and gives meaning to his life; something that directs all of his reasoning and desires. In other words, when he becomes a new man.

That expression “new man” has an interesting past. In ancient Rome, the *novi homines* or “new men” were men from the lower classes who earned or bought their way into public prominence and leadership. In a sense, they reinvented themselves. In the Renaissance, “new men” were humanists who made themselves indispensable as advisers to princes because of their literacy and scholarship—the tools of the new learning. But since the Enlightenment, and especially since the French Revolution, the “new man” is the man unencumbered by the chains and

superstitions of the past—Promethean man who repudiates any memory or morality that could obligate him to the past, and who creates his own identity and future.

Thus the “new Soviet man” and the “new Aryan man” of the last century were creatures of ideology. They were meant to be healthy, learned, unselfish, and zealous in advancing communism or National Socialism, without the help of any god. Both of these “new” men failed. They ended in the gulag, the Holocaust, mass murder and war. And every similar effort will always fail because we don’t and we can’t erase the past. We don’t and we can’t create ourselves. And when we try, we destroy the very thing that guarantees our humanity: the reality that *none* of us is a god, but *all* of us are sons and daughters of the true and only God.

By the way, we Americans should remember that the words *novus ordo seclorum* are stamped on our own Great Seal of the United States. A “new order of the ages”—that’s what the Founders intended this country to be. The potential for good in those words is exactly matched by the potential for vanity, ambition, and evil. And the less biblical we become as a people, the more the balance tips in the wrong direction.

There’s only one way any of us will *ever* become a genuinely new man—a new man right down to our cell structure; the new man our families, our culture and our world need. It’s by giving ourselves totally to God. It’s by putting on the new man in Jesus Christ that Paul describes in Ephesians 4 (22-24) and Colossians 3 (9-17). And the kind of new men we become demands the armor Paul gives us in Ephesians 6 (11-17)—because, like it or not, as Catholic men, we really are engaged in a struggle for the soul of a beautiful but broken world.

To put it another way: The “new knighthood” St. Bernard once praised never really disappears. It’s new and renewed in every generation of faithful Catholic men. And brothers, *that means us*. It’s a vocation that belongs to us, and nobody else. The rules of our order—all 22 of them—were written down 500 years ago by the great Catholic humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam, in his book, *The Manual of a Christian Knight*. It’s a dense text for the modern reader, but here’s the substance of what he says:

Rule 1: Deepen and increase your faith.

Rule 2: Act on your faith; make it a living witness to others.

Rule 3: Analyze and understand your fears; don’t be ruled by them.

Rule 4: Make Jesus Christ the only guide and the only goal of your life.

Rule 5: Turn away from material things; don’t be owned by them.

Rule 6: Train your mind to distinguish the true nature of good and evil.

Rule 7: Never let any failure or setback turn you away from God.

Rule 8: Face temptation guided by God, not by worry or excuses.

Rule 9: Always be ready for attacks from those who fear the Gospel and resent the good.

Rule 10: Always be prepared for temptation. And do what you can to avoid it.

Rule 11: Be alert to two special dangers: moral cowardice and personal pride.

Rule 12: Face your weaknesses and turn them into strengths.

Rule 13: Treat each battle as if it were your last.

Rule 14: A life of virtue has no room for vice; the little vices we tolerate become the most deadly.

Rule 15: Every important decision has alternatives; think them through clearly and honestly in the light of what's right.

Rule 16: Never, ever give up or give in on any matter of moral substance.

Rule 17: Always have a plan of action. Battles are often won or lost before they begin.

Rule 18: Always think through, in advance, the consequences of your choices and actions.

Rule 19: Do nothing—in public or private—that the people you love would not hold in esteem.

Rule 20: Virtue is its own reward; it needs no applause.

Rule 21: Life is demanding and brief; make it count.

Rule 22: Admit and repent your wrongs, never lose hope, encourage your brothers, and then begin again.

Maleness, brothers, is a matter of biology. It just happens. Manhood must be learned and earned and taught. That's our task. So my prayer for all of us today is that God will plant the seed of a new knighthood in our hearts—and make us the kind of “new men” our families, our Church, our nation, and our world need.

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