



A Return to Civility

By Father Benedict Kiely

There are those who believe that contemporary society is the greatest example of developed civilization the world has ever known. Having been liberated from the oppressive burden of religious sentiment, the shackles of moral absolutes, and the slavery of a common cultural heritage, we are now living as truly free men and women. This freedom they would say, is reflected in the world of politics, culture, and the arts; no limit on artistic expression, no censorship of word or image, “you’re free to do what you want to do”, as the chorus of a contemporary pop song goes.

Traveling on an airplane recently, one of the features of this liberating freedom, and the marvelous contribution it makes to the nurturing of our young people, was made clear to me. These days, many planes now have little television screens in the back of the seat, allowing you to watch a large selection of programs. I usually prefer to read a book or try to snooze; sometimes both things happen at the same time. Idly glancing at the young mother and two small children in the row next to me, and also at the mother and teenage son in the row in front, I noticed that they were all watching the same program. A nature program, you might think: well yes, it did involve animal activity, but not elephants or lions. It was actually a show on one of the Cable music channels. I remember a time, in the early Eighties when these channels began, that they actually showed music videos; but we are much too sophisticated and civilized for that now. This program involved a rather seedy-looking former rock star, who gets to “test-drive” a group of competing bimbos, before finally picking one for a “relation-

ship”. This is, apparently, the common fare on these channels, which are specifically aimed at young people; in recent months we have had shows involving a bisexual female “test-driving” both men and women and almost every other variation you might think of—or rather not think of! What struck me, on this plane journey, was that in both families, the adult—the parent—not only was watching this rubbish, but was happy to have the child seated next to her view the same garbage. It is refreshing to know that after Shakespeare, Van Gogh, Mozart, DaVinci, and Wordsworth, civilization has finally reached its zenith with “Flavor of Love”.

The etymology of civilization is, of course, linked with civics, being civilized, and civility. It is further linked with a common culture and the root derivation from the Latin “civis”, meaning “citizen”. In one sense, we have reached a high level of civilization: the area of technological development. In terms of civility, courtesy and cultural development, the programs described above are really a visual parable of cultural disintegration, and the obvious ease of the parents, allowing the children to view this stuff, a sign of moral decay.

As any tenth grader, who has been through a decent Confirmation program would know, freedom does not mean “to do whatever you want to do”: that is license. Freedom is the ability to choose to do the right thing. Freedom has been enslaved by the failed culture of the Enlightenment: that is what is reaching its zenith now. We are not becoming more civilized; we are becoming barbarous and depraved. Even worse, we are becoming de-sensitized to our

depravity—that was what was evident on that plane journey. This is exhibited by a lack of civility, or an even less used word: courtesy. Christians, above all, should model the virtue of courtesy and civility, and that does not exclude, in fact it demands, speaking the truth, in love. More controversially, I would also argue it means refusing to be bound by what one writer has called the “prison-house of insincerity and hypocrisy known as political correctness”. People, on both sides of the political divide, are now afraid to say anything, for fear of being branded a racist, a homophobe, a torturer of little kittens or root vegetables. That is not freedom, it is slavery. Courtesy and civility will allow vigorous debate, in charity, and democracy will not survive without it. If civility is linked with civilization, and civilization encompasses the idea of a common culture, we must also expose the lie that states that this great nation was not founded on the solid basis of the Judeo-Christian culture. This does not, in any way, denigrate the contributions of other cultures to the melting-pot that is America, but for a nation to stay together, history shows it must have a common cultural foundation. When the foundation is removed, or when it is stated that the foundation never existed, it will not be long before the building falls. This nation was, and is, a nation founded on self-evident truths, truths rooted and based on a Divine origin.

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