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A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR THINKING CATHOLICS

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INTRODUCTION

BISHOP TOM GUMBLETON

I've known Tom for a number of years, and have been inspired by his work within the Church as a scholar, and as a writer, and as an editor. I suppose I should also be somewhat wary of Tom Reese, because he has written a number of books; and let me tell you what they are. First of all he has a book called, *Archbishop: Inside the Power Structure of the American Catholic Church*; then he has one called, *A Flock of Shepherds: the National Conference of Catholic Bishops*; and another one called, *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*. He probably knows more about bishops than any other priest or person (laughter), and so I don't know what he has on me, but (much laughter)but in all this serious study, I'm sure he's got many inside stories about many bishops; but that's not why he's here today. He's here purely as a scholar and, as I say, a writer.

He was editor of America Magazine; and his career was sort of stifled there too – I won't go into any of that. As the editor though, one of the things that he did – and perhaps this will tell you what kind of person he is – he wrote and made sure that issues that were to be developed in the magazine, that there would be both sides of the issue presented. And some of these issues of course were somewhat delicate issues within the Catholic community; but he made sure that it wasn't just the so-called party line that was set forth, but what other people thought. And so he obviously is a person of a very open mind, and a very wise person, and a very good person.

Tom grew up in California and in the Society of Jesus in 1974 (Fr. Reese corrects him and says 1962) (much laughter); he was ordained in 1974; he has a Jesuit education – which Jesuits all have (laughter) – taught in a Jesuit high school, the University of San Francisco, and later was assistant to the president of the University of Santa Clara. Tom currently is a senior fellow at the Woodstock Theological Research Center, located in Washington, D. C. And so he comes to us from that Center today to talk to us about a very important topic with all of us, and that is, "How to Survive in the Roman Catholic Church." Thank you.

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FR. THOMAS REESE, S. J.

Thank you for all those kind words. I didn't know that Bishop Gumbleton lied – I'll have to add that to all the nice things he said about me. And I want to thank Mary, especially for reading the Mission Statement of this group, because when Tom called me and invited me to come and speak to this group, you know, he said the name of this group is *Elephants in the Living Room*. I said, "That's a strange name;" I said. "Is this a young Republican group? (Much laughter) Tom, what are you doing? What are you getting me into?" Anyway, I'm glad he talked me into it.

Anyway, the title of my talk is *A Survival Guide for Thinking Catholics*. And when I picked this topic, frankly, I wasn't sure what I was going to say; and by the time I finish, you may conclude that I still don't know what I'm talking about. (Laughter) This is a work in progress. I hope to develop it into a book; and so I'm looking forward to your questions, and your reactions, and your comments on the book as we go along also.

Let me preface my comments by saying that, if you are completely happy with everything going on in the Catholic Church today, you're at the wrong lecture (much laughter). If you've never had a doubt about the faith, please leave now; I don't want to cause you any doubts. If you've never disagreed with anything that a bishop or a pope has said, then I think you are at the wrong lecture; and your time would be better spent somewhere else; and I won't feel insulted if you walk out at this point.

For the rest of us, I think it's important to acknowledge that sometimes we question what is going on in the Church. There's no point in pretending that we don't. We have a mind that by its very nature asks questions. A questioning mind is fostered by our education and by the culture in which we live. It is part of who we are and we cannot run away from it. I would insist that a questioning mind is not just an affliction of liberal Catholics; it's also alive and well in conservative Catholics. Liberals may question the ban on artificial birth control, married priests and women priests. Conservatives, on the other hand, question the Church's opposition to capital punishment, its opposition to the war in Iraq, and the Church's support for welfare programs and illegal immigrants. And I could go on and on with the laundry list of controversial issues in the Church today.

In the past people would say, *Roma locuta est; causa finite est!* – "Rome has spoken; the case is closed!" Today, the reality is often, "Rome has spoken; let the discussion begin." (Much laughter) How then should we, as thinking Catholics, deal with our questions, our doubts? I will suggest ten guidelines for surviving as a thinking Catholic today.

First, number 1: It's important to understand what the Church is saying.

Is your problem a result of a misunderstanding, or a true disagreement? Many arguments occur as a result of misunderstandings. Look at our families; how many arguments do we have over misunderstandings? We must truly listen to the other person, and try to understand what they are saying, why they are saying it. I really think the ideal is to be able to explain the person's position better than they can. That's the ideal.

Second: Our understanding should be inspired by sympathy, not sarcasm or cynicism.

Whatever a person says should be interpreted in the best possible light. As St. Ignatius says in his Spiritual Exercises, "Not only must we get inside the other's mind, we must also get inside the other's heart and feelings." If we disagree, we should disagree as friends in the Lord, not as opposing armies of fanatics. They should know we are Christians by our love; not that we are Catholics by our fights.

Third: You have to do your homework.

The issues that face the Church today are complex and not solvable by sound bites. Magazines like America and Commonweal are helpful with their articles on contemporary topics – and groups like this that get together. I mean: I read over the list of speakers you've had here; it's a Who's Who of people – really first rate scholars in the United States. And this is the way you really get to an understanding of the issues that face the Church. As Catholics we don't believe it's sufficient to simply listen to the pope and ignore Scriptures, for example; nor do we believe it's sufficient to simply read the Scripture in isolation from a believing community. We're a Church that does both.

Fourth: We are a believing community with 2,000 years of history and tradition.

We need to know our history: our triumphs, our failures, our saints, our sinners. I mean, for me, it's quite encouraging to know that there really were worse times in the history of the Church (laughter). Remember the Borgias? And the Church survived. Thus, a study of history helps one take the long view. Things have been worse; things can get better. For example: prior to the 20th century a Catholic understanding of the bible appeared to be in conflict with science. Today, contemporary biblical scholarship has not only eliminated this conflict, but opened up the Scriptures to a much deeper understanding than we've ever had before. Just think about it: a hundred years from now, how many of our theological doubts will seem as silly as those caused among Christians, who looked through a telescope, and suddenly discovered that the earth was going around the sun; the sun was not going around the earth. Reading history is also an extremely liberating experience.

As a young person, growing up in the fifties and the sixties, I was quite conservative and like, you know, other people of my generation, I could not think the Mass could ever change. The liturgy... I mean, it's always been that way, hasn't it? The beginning of my transformation was reading "The History of the Roman Rite" by Joseph Jungmann. The history of the Mass showed that the Mass had continually changed over the centuries, in response to changing cultures and changing theological trends. If the Mass changed in the past, there's no reason it could not change again in the future. Similarly, John Noonan's

book “Contraception,” and his book on “Usury,” are extraordinary books at cases of development of doctrine in the Church. Likewise, my own books – I have written of the history of the Roman Curia, the appointment of bishops, and the election of Popes. For example, for most of the Church’s history, the pope had absolutely nothing to do with the appointment of bishops outside of Italy. This is a very modern innovation in the Church. If people and priests elected their bishops in the past, there is no doctrinal reason they could not do so today.

Fifth point: It is very important to distinguish between law and doctrine.

If you are a conservative, and want to return to the Pre-Vatican II liturgy, don’t let anyone tell you, “You’re a heretic.” If you are a liberal, and believe married men should be ordained priests, don’t let anyone tell you that you are a heretic. The questions of married priests and Latin in the liturgy are not doctrinal issues; these are questions of Canon Law and Liturgical Law. So too are the laws governing the selection of bishops, the role of the Roman Curia. Laws have changed over time; laws can change again.

Sixth point: It is very important to understand the level of authority of a Church or a doctrinal position with which you disagree.

Popes have only made two infallible statements since Vatican I: on the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception. An instruction from a Vatican Council, let alone an article in L’Osservatore Romano, are not on the same level as conciliar documents. Even an encyclical will have parts that are less authoritative than others. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, theologians had a whole system of what they called theological notes, by which they weighted the magisterial authority of various doctrinal statements – Fr. Francis Sullivan, of Boston College, has written extensively on this. And this is very important, because of the tendency of some people to treat every statement that comes from the Vatican as definitive or infallible, when in fact, they’re not.

One of the problems is that the Church is very reluctant to ever say it was wrong. (Laughter) For example, at a meeting of theologians and scientists at Castel Gandolfo, John Paul II read a speech – it was written by someone else – and sadly, he had not had a chance to look it over before he got up to the podium. And, you know, as he was reading it, the scientists at the meeting thought that it was quite out of touch with, you know, contemporary thought of the relationship between science and religion. Halfway through the speech, it became clear that the pope was not agreeing (much loud laughter) with what he was reading. However, a week later, the talk was published in L’Osservatore Romano; but several months later, when all of the talks at the conference were collected together, lo and behold, the speech by the pope was very different from the one he actually gave. No one in the Vatican bothered to point this out, or explain why this change came about. The problem is the Vatican never admits that it, or the pope, were wrong.

L’Osservatore Romano once published an obituary of a bishop who was still alive. He was upset and demanded a retraction. They told him the L’Osservatore Romano does not publish retractions; but they would publish an interview with him, so that all of his friends would know that he was still alive. (Very much loud laughter and clapping throughout this observation) Today we see that even long standing teachings of the Church can sometimes change. For example, the Church now teaches that capital punishment is wrong; and, you know, we know that popes executed people in the Papal States. You know this was not a problem for the Church for a number of centuries.

Likewise the Church has rethought its position on limbo – you all remember limbo? You know, I mean, for the past few decades, most theologians didn’t believe in limbo; they believed that un-baptized children went directly to heaven. Well, Pope Benedict seems to agree; so we see a change coming about.

Many theologians, including some conservatives, have questioned the Church’s position in opposition to the use of condoms as a protection against AIDS. There’s a good chance that this position will change sometime in the future, probably by the time the AIDS epidemic is over (Loud laughter), sadly, but true.

Likewise, shortly before he died, John Paul II read an allocution on the care of patients in a persistent vegetative state that seemed to depart significantly from traditional Catholic teaching. When Catholic hospitals in the United States questioned the Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith with Cardinal

Ratzinger, about the magisterial authority of this statement, the response was, they didn't have a clue, because they weren't involved in drafting the statement. Likewise, it was learned that the papal theologian, who is suppose to review everything the pope says was bypassed. So the questions were raised, who wrote this speech, who gave it to an ailing pope, who short-circuited the normal curial processes? However, since similar statements have continued to come out of Rome it appears that the Vatican is attempting to change traditional Catholic teaching on the treatment of dying patients.

Seventh point or guideline: It's important to know how to interpret the words in a doctrinal statement.

Catholics have learned from scripture scholars that it is a mistake to understand the bible in a fundamentalist way. It's important to understand the historical and cultural context of the writing, the literary style, and the audience to which it is addressed. The same is true of doctrinal statements. For example, we profess that there are Three Persons in One God. My guess is that there are very few people in this room who could explain that statement correctly. Why? Because our psychological understanding of the word person is quite different from the metaphysical understanding of the word person, which was held by the bishops at the council that defined it; they're just living in a totally different world than we are.

Likewise, when a Vatican document says that homosexuals are intrinsically disordered, we tend to think of this as a psychological description when the authors meant it as a philosophical description. You still may disagree with the description, but it's best to understand what you're disagreeing with.

Another misunderstanding is that when neo-conservatives cite John Paul's support for free markets as an endorsement of Republican attacks on government; John Paul was looking at Poland when he sang the praises of the free market, not at the United States. Who was his audience?

Cardinal Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, has been famous for using words in ways that upset people. (Laughter) Often, this is because he defines the words quite differently than the normal person on the street. For example, he says that the gays are intrinsically disordered; women are not equal to men, but complementary; Islam is an irrationally religion; Buddhism is auto-erotic; colonialism was a blessing for Latin America; Harry Potter is bad for children. (Laughter) Now, those make terrible headlines – or great headlines if you are a headline writer – but, you know, understanding what exactly he meant in all those statements is something a little different from our immediate reaction to those statements. I don't think he was really trying to insult people.

You know, it was the same thing when he said that most Protestant churches weren't true churches. Do you remember that? (Audience answers yes) We can't call them sister churches; they're Christian communities. Well, once you define a church as something that has episcopacy, all the sacraments, well, that leaves out everybody but the Orthodox; and us you know, so you just wiped out all the others; and they have to become Christian communities rather than churches. Well needless to say, they weren't pleased; that was not a step forward in ecumenical dialogue. But he speaks like that because, I think, he still believes he's still a German professor in a classroom, where he can define the vocabulary, and all the students take notes, and understand it the way he gives it; and that's just not the world in which he lives anymore; and I don't think he recognizes that.

Eighth guideline: It's important to understand that sometimes the Church uses words that are open to multiple interpretations, as a way of covering over differences and maintaining unity.

This was certainly done at the Second Vatican Council. A lot of times they picked a word that was vague enough and said, "Well, you know, we'll just worry about that in the future; you know, so that everybody could kind of agree." Yes, this is a wonderful example. This was done because Paul VI wanted the documents approved, not by majority vote, not by two-thirds majority; he wanted practical consensus, you know, in support of these documents. Compromise and ambiguity were important in gaining the conservative votes at the council.

Problems arise today when this historical fact is ignored, and conservatives go back and give unambiguous interpretation to these words, these ambiguous phrases, as if the Council fathers completely agreed with the conservative minority.

In 2005 we saw ambiguity at work in the Vatican instruction on homosexual seminarians, when it said that those with homosexual tendencies could not be ordained. The document was greeted in the United States on the right with joy, because conservatives interpreted tendencies to mean orientation, and thus thought it banned even celibate homosexuals from ordination. The document was greeted on the left with horror, because they interpreted it exactly the same way as the conservatives. On the other hand, the middle, represented by most American bishops and seminary officials, interpreted the word tendencies differently from the right and left. Their interpretation left room for mature celibate homosexual seminarians. L'Osservatore Romano ran an article interpreting the instruction in the same way as the right, but it was simply ignored by the bishops, who felt they had greater authority to interpret the Magisterium than any newspaper writer.

Ninth guideline: In my parents' day, there were only two options when facing questions about your faith, accept what the Church taught or get out.

Schism was the route taken by Lefevre on the right, while liberals tend to drop out, or join liberal Protestant churches. I would suggest that this is in fact, more Irish or Northern European than Catholic. Certainly this is not the way Italians or Africans live their faith. If you ask a typical Italian male if he is a Catholic, the response will be, "Of course." But if you ask, "Do you go to Mass on Sunday?" the response will be: "*Sole Catholico; non sole fanatico!*" (Very much laughter). Italy also has one of the lowest birth rates in the world; and it's not because Italians don't enjoy sex, or because they are practicing Natural Family Planning. (Laughter) They also, overwhelmingly, voted in a referendum to legalize abortion. Italians pick and choose like any cafeteria Catholic in the United States; they invented this long before we got in line. The only difference between Italians and Americans is that Italians don't question Church authority publically; they simply do what they want. The difference between Italian Catholics and American Catholics is more cultural than theological.

In most European schools the lecture method is alive and well; the students take notes and memorize them. If you ask a European student about the French Revolution, they can spout off what they heard at class; and they just sound like the brightest kids in the world, you know, the names, dates, everything that happened. But if you go into a European classroom, you rarely hear a probing question from the students. If the teacher ignores economics, no student would ask about the economic causes of the French Revolution. It is considered impolite and insulting to challenge the teacher. Even the other students would say, "What are you doing? Who do you think you are?" because the teacher is the magister, the term from which Magisterium comes. American educators on the other hand, try to stimulate questions and discussions in their classrooms; Europe hasn't heard of (John) Dewey.

An American seminarian, with a master's degree in theology from Yale, a very bright kid, was studying philosophy in Rome. He had his master's degree before he entered the seminary. He was taking a course on Hegel; and the professor commented briefly on an essay written by Hegel. So, you know, the student was kind of intrigued; he went to the library, got the essay, read it in German, and afterwards he still had some questions about it; so he made an appointment to go see the teacher. And after explaining what he had done, the professor looked at him and he said, "Why are you reading Hegel?" And so the American thinking, "My Italian must not be good; I must not be explaining myself;" so he started, "Your class, and you know, you mentioned this essay, and I went to the library," And the teacher interrupted him and said, "Why are you reading Hegel? I will explain to you what Hegel means." (Much laughter and ohs) This is how many bishops and Vatican officials view their role as teachers, as the Magisterium.

Tenth and final point: We need to recognize that there will always be disagreements in the Church.

The Acts of the Apostles disclose that Paul disagreed with Peter at the Council of Jerusalem; you know, they had this whole argument about how the Gentiles were going to be integrated into the Church, and whether they had to follow all the Jewish laws and prescriptions. Well, this story is not described by Luke simply as an historical footnote, but as an example of the reality of the Church. There is always going to be disagreements. What I find so delightful about this story is that the disagreements were resolved through compromise. Gentiles would not have to be circumcised, but they would have to abstain from blood sacrifice to idols and from adultery. Now what would have happened to the Church if Peter and Paul had not been able to work out that compromise?

And you look at the Church today, and how difficult it is to get people to compromise, when that is the model that's presented to us by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. In the Catholic Church we believe that an informed conscience is our highest authority. We also believe, however, in the importance of humility. One must pray not simply for the conversion of one's opponents, one must pray also for our own conversion of heart. Humility and charity are the virtues that are necessary for any community, whether it is a family, a parish, a diocese or the universal Church. These virtues are needed at every level of the Church; without them we have anarchy, witch hunts, schisms and clericalism.

Church history teaches us that there are periods of progress when the Church responds with intelligence, reason and responsibility to new situations; but there have also been periods of decline when individual and group bias blinds people to reality, hinders good judgment, and limits true freedom. Although this is true of any organization and community, what distinguishes the Church is its openness to redemption, which can repair and renew Christians as individuals, and as a community.

Despite our weaknesses and sinfulness, we have faith in the Word of God that shows us the way. We have hope based on Christ's victory over sin and death, and his promise of the Spirit. We have love that impels us to forgiveness and companionship at the Lord's Table. Any survival strategy for thinking Catholics must be based on such faith, hope and love. Thank you very much. (Applause)

Transcribed by
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