

Remarks to 2019 Graduates
Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family
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In *Familiaris Consortio*, St. John Paul II wrote that the family has “the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love” (no. 17). Of course, this is a statement that our graduates know very well. It is central to understanding the theology and pastoral approach of our Institute’s founder.

But we can also say that this is the fundamental mission of the Church. It too has “the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love.”

St. John Paul II expresses this idea himself in the very same sentence in *Familiaris Consortio* quoted above. The family’s mission “is a living reflection of and a real sharing of God’s love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church His Bride.”

We might say that it is precisely here—in the mission to “guard, reveal and communicate love” that Christianity stakes its claim that Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life.”

And it is for this very reason that the present scandal affecting the Church—particularly the Church in America—has been so damaging since it strikes so directly at this claim.

As we know, the problem is extremely complex; so many people have been deeply wounded, so much has been done in response and so much more remains to be done.

Today, is a time to thank Pope Francis for his action last week in establishing new requirements for the mandatory reporting of abuse and for offering new protections for those who make such reports. It is our prayer that this new structure and its attending procedures will provide a new and constructive environment that will help the bishops of the United States when they meet this Summer.

In today’s environment both within the Church and within the broader culture the central mission of our Institute has never been more important—to show both theologically and pastorally the beauty and power of the Catholic family and its mission to guard, reveal and communicate love.

Writing more than 75 years ago in *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, Henri de Lubac observed, “the negation that underlies positivist humanism, Marxist humanism and Nietzschean humanism is not so much *atheism*, in the strict sense of the word, as *antitheism*, or, precisely, *antiChristianism*” (p. 11-12).

We might add to this the destructive impact upon culture of Freud’s theory of the psychoanalysis of religion and Darwin’s theory of evolution and the origin of the species.

Paul Ricoeur has observed that Nietzsche, Marx and Freud all put Christianity on trial—and it is a trial not dissimilar to that trial first convened by the Enlightenment.

Writing during the same years as Cardinal de Lubac, the French historian Paul Hazard suggested that the Enlightenment had placed Christianity on trial—for thinkers such as Voltaire and Diderot, Christianity “was so gross, so palpable, so glaring an imposture that they could not imagine how it had started, still less how it had lasted so long.”

“Christianity had left a trail of crime and falsehood all along the track of history,” he continued. “All the ills with which we are afflicted would disappear the day that Christianity

was done away with. Excesses which the Church had tolerated, and sometimes encouraged, were represented as being the very substance of Christian belief.” (*European Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 46). This was how Hazard more than seven decades ago described “Christ’s most violent accusers in the great trial” of the Enlightenment (p. 382). Yet it has a freshness about it akin to innumerable blog posts in recent years.

Certainly, there are important differences regarding the treatment of Christianity by both the Scottish and Continental Enlightenment—and that difference may account for much of what has been described as American “exceptionalism.” But if so, it is an exceptionalism rapidly fading from view.

Today, as in the Enlightenment, the accusation remains the same—Christianity is not the way, but the barrier to human fulfillment and happiness.

Alternatively, in a more mild approach Christian influence is simply ignored and, in the process, erased from our history.

A fine example is historian Jon Meacham’s recent book, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*. President Franklin Roosevelt’s prayer for the Allies D-Day invasion of Normandy is reprinted but with only the gloss that it was “beautifully read” by the president. There is no mention of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* with its dependence upon Augustine and Aquinas. Nor is mention made of President John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address with its famous opening that “the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God” as the founding principle of American independence.

Here we find a national “soul” with very little room for transcendence.

Which brings us to the adequacy of our response.

Dostoevsky told us, “The West has lost Christ and that is why it is dying.” If this is so, then what is the anecdote? How are we to re-introduce Christ to our culture?

This week we celebrated Good Shepard Sunday. The words of the Good Shepard to St. Peter still echo down the ages to us—and today especially to our graduates: “Do you love me? Feed my sheep.”

But what is the food that we are to give His sheep?

It is that food which only the Church of the Good Shepard can give—the love of God for humanity revealed in Jesus Christ.

As St. John Paul II wrote in *Redemptor Hominis*, “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him” (no. 10).

What St. John Paul II wrote about an individual life that is incomprehensible and senseless without love is also equally true about society.

Do those who eagerly put Christ and his church on trial have anything to offer in any way comparable to the Father’s love revealed in Christ? Which political, economic or scientific theory can compare with the God who loves the world so much that he gives his son to it? And how are we to demonstrate this reality?

We are back to the mission of the family and to that of our Institute—to guard, reveal and communicate His love in a living and authentic way to each person, each family and every society.

This is a time for the most rigorous scholarship in the understanding and defense of our Faith and it is also a time for a profound witness of the living presence of our Faith. This has been the mission and challenge of our Institute in Washington for three decades. Today, we welcome you—our most recent graduates—to continue with us in this great task.