

PRINCIPLES

FROM CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

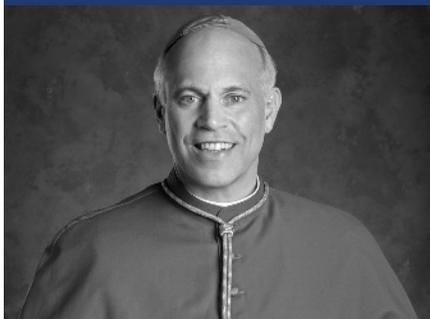
Responding to 'Cancel Culture' with Truth, Goodness, and Beauty



ARCHBISHOP SALVATORE CORDILEONE

You likely remember, as I do, that tense moment in April 2019 when the whole world (Catholics and non-Catholics alike) looked on in shock as flames threatened to destroy Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. It was an uncanny moment of unity in suffering together as we witnessed the potential loss of an ancient, soaring beauty—the beauty of that great cathedral which has meant so much to so many over the centuries. I am still struck at how the whole world, regardless of faith affiliation or lack thereof, mourned the destruction of that great edifice to the glory and majesty of God. It hit home for me when I attended a commemoration service of that great cathedral at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, home church of the Episcopal Diocese and modeled after the iconic Notre Dame de Paris. It was one of those moments of solidarity in which the sentiment was “we are all French.” Truly, Notre Dame is the physical expression of all that is great in French culture and legacy, and, even as secularized as France has become, it remains the mother of every French person.

About the Author



Archbishop Salvatore Joseph Cordileone earned his B.A. in philosophy from the University of San Diego and earned a second bachelor's degree in Sacred Theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University. Archbishop Cordileone was ordained to the priesthood in 1982 and continued his studies at Gregorian University from 1985-89, earning a doctorate in canon law. After serving as Auxiliary Bishop of San Diego and as Bishop of Oakland, Pope Benedict XVI appointed him as the ninth Archbishop of San Francisco in 2012. Archbishop Cordileone serves as Chairman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth and is also a member of the Administrative Committee of the USCCB and a member of the USCCB Committee for Canonical Affairs and Church Governance. In 2021, he was named prior of the U.S. delegation of the Sacred Military Constantinian Order of St. George.

We can see how the beauty of Notre Dame Cathedral offers the world a brief respite from the incessant deconstruction and violence to which our society is subject nowadays. The movements marked by these trends are often carried out by protagonists of what social commentators refer to as the “cancel culture.” The online “Urban Dictionary” defines “cancel culture” as:

A modern internet phenomenon where a person is ejected from influence or fame by questionable actions. It is caused by a critical mass of people who are quick to judge and slow to question. It is commonly caused by an accusation, whether that accusation has merit or not. It is a direct result of the ignorance of people caused [by] communication technologies outpacing the growth in available knowledge of a person.

If anyone thought that cancel culture was a new phenomenon, though, they would stand corrected. The Church reminds us of this every year on Good Friday. Was not Our Lord ejected from influence because He posed a threat to the worldly power of the governing authorities and the leaders of His own people? Were not the people quick to judge without thinking things through, even the scholars of the Law who should have known better? Do we not see here a growing mob mentality that erupts in violence against an innocent man? This is the story on the human level. However, this is also the same story we are seeing played out before our eyes today. What do the cancelers really want to cancel out? It is far more than those who disagree with them. The activists are seeking to discredit the great protagonists of Western civilization, both in the

history of our country and of our Church. How else can one explain the toppling of statues of such giants of our history as Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, and St. Junípero Serra?

We should not be naïve: the cancel culture wants to cancel Western Civilization, which is another way of saying the Church. The way to accomplish this is to cancel out truth, beauty, and goodness. We know these three as the great transcendentals, the doorway to a God Who is the perfection of each. *If we are to halt the cancel culture, we must rediscover and promote the transcendentals—the avenues by which the Catholic Church must reawaken men and women to the Faith.*

THE POWER OF THE TRANSCENDENTALS

We live in an age that contests truth, goodness, and beauty. Consider how the murder of infants has been named as a right by so many. Our access to the truth through reason itself has become the subject of controversy. The Enlightenment—with France being perhaps its greatest protagonist—believed in truth and its pursuit through reason. While a sound principle, it is incomplete, for the Enlightenment privatized faith, relegating it to a matter of private opinion, rather than recognizing it as one of the sources with which to apprehend truth.

One of the great hallmarks of the Catholic intellectual tradition, of course, is the understanding that faith and reason must work together, each making its own unique contribution and serving as a necessary check on the other in order to come to an understanding of the truth. After centuries of a modern world trying to understand truth on the basis of reason alone, what do

we have now in the post-modern world? Neither faith nor reason is considered a source of truth; rather, truth itself is privatized, a matter of private opinion by which I am entitled to live and which everyone else is obliged to respect. So, in the quest for truth, the long arc of Western history has moved first from faith and reason, to reason by itself, and finally to neither faith nor reason but only the will to power.

The world's response to the tragic fire that destroyed Notre Dame de Paris shows that the language of beauty, especially classic beauty, continues to touch hearts in our troubled time. It does so because it has withstood the test of time: it is universal, beautiful in every age and in every culture. There is something intuitive about beauty, which is not subject to personal opinion or argumentation. Beauty is, to a large extent, an untapped resource for reaching people, especially young people, with the Gospel in this deconstructed age in which we live.

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The timelessness of sacred beauty lifts us out of the world of time and gives us a glimpse of that which transcends time, of what ultimately lasts, of what our goal and our final home is: ultimately, the reality of God. A key to the path of renewal of both Church and society is to recapture the importance of beauty, to recognize its universality and



Stained-glass window of St. Junípero Serra

its power to evangelize and open hearts to the truth.

Beauty is harder to cancel than truth, as witnessed by the sadness of the entire world at the burning of Notre Dame de Paris. This is not to mention all of the other great medieval cathedrals of Europe which people from all over the world have come for almost a millennium to admire. To this day, visitors are reduced to silence by the timeless beauty of these churches.

The Church's witness of her commitment to goodness may also be difficult to cancel, but activists today have perpetrated myths and distortions of the Church's historical record such that ignorance and hatred of the Catholic Church now dominate the secular cultural mentality. For instance, the ongoing attempt to transform St. Junípero Serra—a man who gave his life to serve, protect, educate, and evangelize the Indians he loved—into a symbol of colonialism, slavery, and oppression is a prime example. We do not know our own history: it was the Catholic Church that early on vigorously denounced the dehumanization of Africans and

indigenous Americans. It was the Church that perceived, when the culture did not, that these people had rights and were made in the image of God.

Very early in the encounter between the Old World and the New, in his 1537 Papal Bull *Sublimus Deus*, the Roman Pontiff Paul III declared that the indigenous people of the Americas “are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property”:

Desiring to provide ample remedy for these evils, We define and declare ... that ... notwithstanding whatever may have been or may be said to the contrary, the said Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians, are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; and that they may and should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved

Let us tell the truth about the past as we strive for a better future. But let that truth include the sublime stories of Catholic heroes, which we not only need to tell as history but also express in the arts and even in the liturgy. That is why this year I have commissioned a new musical composition for Mass honoring St. Junípero Serra. The Mass will be celebrated for the first time on his feast day (July 1) at Mission Dolores, one of the nine Franciscan missions along the California coast personally founded by St. Junípero.

These missions are an example of what the Benedict XVI Institute’s poet-in-residence James Matthew Wilson calls “America’s other founding,” the Catholic founding.

Did you know, for example, that there is an extant letter from St. Junípero Serra in which he asks his brother Franciscans to pray for the success of George Washington and the American Revolution? We do not know our own history as Catholics in our own country. We must tell the truth of course, but in that truth we must never neglect the beauty and goodness our faith has inspired.

Turning to goodness, the Church has been equally attentive to evangelizing through this transcendental as well. Throughout the Church’s history, her organization of hospitals, born from her commitment of service to the sick and the poor, testifies to this fact. Hospitals and other such organized endeavors are “service” in the authentic Christian sense: not simply giving from what one has left over to help someone else less fortunate, but solidarity with the poor. This explains the flourishing of religious orders founded not only to serve the poor, but actually to be poor. Citizens with claims to wealth and nobility—such as St. Elizabeth of Hungary, St. Frances of Rome, St. Margaret of Scotland, and St. Francis of Assisi—would divest themselves of these goods in order to be poor in service to the poor.

This is the civilization, the Christian civilization, built by the Church founded by Jesus Christ. And on the day that those who sought to cancel Him thought they had succeeded, we see God’s blueprint for this plan. St. John tells us in his Gospel that, when Jesus was crucified, “Pilate ... had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, ‘Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews’ ... and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek” (Jn. 19:19–20). In this is the essence of the plan of Western civilization.

THE BLUEPRINT

It begins with God's original Chosen People. God gave them the Law, the Torah, through Moses—not just rules and regulations to help the people get along, but the revelation of His higher truth. From this people, was born the Church to whom God gave the fullness of revelation in His Son Jesus Christ. As the Church began to fulfill the Great Commission and proclaim the Gospel throughout the world, she came more and more into contact with Greek culture.

Greek thought and the Greek language were the predominant cultural influence in the world of the time, much like the English language and American culture are now. So this was the next step in building from that blueprint: Greeks being the great philosophers that they were, the early Church Fathers understood how to translate Semitic thought into categories of Greek philosophy in order to bring the Gentiles to salvation in Christ.

Then, when Rome became Christian, the Church was able to avail herself of the physical and social infrastructure of the Roman Empire that had spread throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. The roads, law, and governing models of the Roman Empire gave the Church the infrastructure she needed to build a common Christian community throughout the whole world.

THE MASS: CRUX OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Where does all of this come together in our everyday experience as Catholics? It comes together in the Mass: at the Mass we have the Bible, the Church's Magisterium through her Tradition, art, music, architecture, and poetry in motion in the form of ceremony. And, we have Latin, Hebrew, and Greek.

Notice how the Church has always been careful to preserve something of the previous official language of prayer in those rare occasions when that language changed. The



Mass in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican (2015).

ABOUT PRINCIPLES Animated by the joyful, lived experience of the faith, *Principles* draws on the fruits of an authentically Catholic liberal arts education to explore the ideas necessary to live a fully integrated Catholic life: one that upholds the value of human dignity, the role of virtue in private and public spheres, and the centrality of charity in both thought and action. We envision a Church—and a watching world—that embraces sound reason rooted in a robust faith.

first Christians prayed in Hebrew, because they were Jewish. With the success of the evangelization of the Gentiles, the language of prayer changed to Greek within the first generation. However, in her liturgy the Church held onto the traces of her first language, as she does to this day: *Amen*, *Alleluia*, *Hosanna* and *Sabbaoth*. About two hundred years later, when the Church in Rome started to celebrate Mass in Latin, Christians there still retained some Greek words – *Kyrie eleison*, *Christe eleison* – in addition to continuing to hold onto the Hebrew words.

It is thus that the Mass encapsulates all of Western civilization; it is the distilled essence of that civilization, of which it was the prime force in building. It brings together truth, beauty, and goodness all in one place.

A special focus should be given to beauty, especially in the Mass. This applies above all to music. Music in the Church's high sacred tradition has a power like no other to touch souls, to elevate and ennoble the worshipper with a heightened sensitivity to the sacred and the majesty of God. As *Sacrosanctum Concilium* teaches, "The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given

pride of place in liturgical services." Gregorian chant is our music of worship, our ancient patrimony: Gregorian chant is the music of the Latin liturgy just as Byzantine chant is the music of the Greek liturgy. Of course, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy goes on immediately to add: "But other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, are by no means excluded from liturgical celebrations, so long as they accord with the spirit of the liturgical action." The work of rebuilding Western civilization begins with repairing the Mass.

CANCELING SIN

Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome; Hebrew, Greek and Latin: these are the building blocks of a great Christian civilization. And we have all of the elements of Western civilization at the Mass, the distilled essence of that civilization, represented by the sign Pilate had placed at the top of the Cross. But to see what is at the heart of it all, we must look below the inscription. If we fail to do that, it will all be simply a façade. Pilate said, "Behold, your king." We need to gaze upon Christ on the Cross, and truly behold our King, the one who gave everything for us, even

though He had no need to receive anything from us. Jesus Himself—not only His teaching, but He, in his death on the Cross—is the blueprint for a civilization of truth and love, a civilization imbued with a Christian ethos.

The drive to cancel out the blueprint for civilization, then, ultimately is the attempt to cancel out the founder of the Church, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This is nothing more than the old and ugly tendency toward sin, a tendency that affects all of us in our human weakness. All of us, to some extent, are with the crowds in the story: instead of beholding our King, we claim, “We have no king but Caesar.” It is our sins that, with the crowd, shout out, “Crucify him!” There is nothing new about this. We are back in the Garden of Eden at the time of the Fall: it is the attempt to cancel

out God, in order to do things our own way.

There is, though, one cancel culture Our Lord did come to establish: that of canceling out sin. He has done that on the Cross, paying the debt we owed to God but which we could not pay ourselves. Since it was man who incurred the debt, man had to pay it back. So that is the one thing the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity did need to receive from us, a human nature, so, as man, He could pay back what we could not without His divine nature. But He only “needed” this because He condescended to come to our rescue, not because He stood to get anything out of it Himself.

That is the Good News, and the pattern for how the human person lives in accordance with the original human dignity that God gave us. This needs to be told to the world, to open deaf ears and break through the cacophony of post-modern cancel culture so the message can get through and penetrate hearts and take root.

It is good that we behold our King on the Cross. And it is good, too, to see in the inscription above Him His plan for our life in a world in which His truth, beauty, and goodness can thrive. All of this comes together in the Holy Mass and is made present there; the greatest gift of all, though, is His presence there. He comes to meet us in every Mass, to bring us His truth and love. This is the civilization that leads all into true and lasting happiness with Christ, a civilization born from the heart of His Bride, the Church. 

*For footnotes, please see getprinciples.com

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We pray that our nation may turn away from the Culture of Death and begin a new chapter in which all lives are valued. Through our work together, may we educate the next generation in Truth that they may spread the Gospel of Life to our broken world.

Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us.
Immaculate Heart of Mary, pray for us.

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