

A Nation in Need of Healing

An exclusive interview with John Cardinal O'Connor

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*An MBA Special Report
by Dennis M. Howard*





The Legacy of John Cardinal O'Connor

By Dennis M. Howard

It was a moment to remember.

Bernard Cardinal Law had just reminded his listeners of the “great legacy” John Cardinal O’Connor had left us -- “the reminder that the church must always be unambiguously pro-life.”

At these words, St. Patrick’s Cathedral broke into a thunderous, standing ovation, while pro-abortion politicians squirmed in their seats, and then rose reluctantly in silent tribute to a Cardinal who rarely lost an opportunity to speak out for the poor, the oppressed, and the unborn.

They returned again five weeks later for the installation of his successor, Archbishop Edward Michael Egan, who put them on notice that he saw his coming to New York as joining a community of faith that “heroically defends the child in the womb, the elderly in the nursing home, the sick and the disabled.”

Egan left no doubt that he planned to walk in the footsteps of his predecessor and to continue to proclaim the same Christian vision.

Still, the memory of the late Cardinal will never fade because of the lives he touched, the hearts he inspired, and the example he gave of love, justice, and compassion. Until he fell ill, he rarely missed a St. Patrick’s Day or a Labor Day Parade, a March for Life in Washington, or a chance to reach out to people of other faiths and races, to promote Catholic education, or to advance the rights of the worker, the poor, the disabled, and often the most forgotten of all -- the unborn.

One union with 350,000 members took a full-page ad in the *N.Y. Times*, hailing him as “the Patron Saint of working people.”

That he was, but he was also a patron to the pro-life movement, and an example of the kind of commitment to pro-life education that is absolutely essential if we are to have hope that the current “culture of death” can be

transformed into a culture of life.

For some 15 years, John Cardinal O’Connor presided over the New York Archdiocese from an ecclesiastical executive suite high over Manhattan with an outgoing combination of openness, compassion, and social vision quite unlike any of his predecessors. Certainly his was not the style of the late Francis Cardinal Spellman, whose public image was traditional and remote though privately he could be quite personable, nor of the saintly, retiring Terence Cardinal Cooke, whose cause for canonization is underway.

A Philadelphian who came to New York via Scranton, Pa., where he served two years as bishop, O’Connor nevertheless seemed as quintessentially “New York” as the indigenous cast of characters, political and otherwise, who populate the city. Yet he seemed to enjoy every minute of it from his daily morning homily in St. Patrick’s Cathedral to the irritations of life in this confrontational city.

The list of irritants was, and is, nearly endless: from errant Catholic politicians to the condescending anti-Catholicism of *The New York Times* to aggressive gay demonstrations in St. Patrick’s Cathedral, from problems with pedophilic priests to racial and ethnic divisions in the neighborhoods and social conditions that keep New York’s poor homeless and hungry

Yet he wore them all as serenely as a hairshirt on a medieval monk. Never has New York had a more accessible Catholic archbishop, nor one readier to reach out personally when neighborhoods explode.

My own personal encounter with the Cardinal came in 1993 when I was making plans to start The Movement for a Better America. I had just finished preparing a series of ads designed to draw public attention to the social and economic consequences of abortion, a series that later became our Campaign for Life. I had sent sets

of the ads to a dozen pro-life leaders, including Congressman Henry Hyde of Illinois, Paul Weyrich of the Free Congress Foundation, and to the Cardinal among others -- hoping for some constructive comment. Two weeks passed and I had heard from no one. Then the phone rang and a nun who was one of the Cardinal's secretaries identified herself and announced, "The Cardinal would like to see you."

Recovering quickly, I readily agreed to an available appointment two weeks later. Arriving, I relaxed in a waiting room for a few minutes before being ushered into the Cardinal's mahogany-paneled office.

A few moments later, he walked in and instantly put me at ease, and we spent the next hour discussing the thinking behind the campaign, and reviewing the ads one at a time. The only changes he suggested were copy changes to keep within legal guidelines -- like dropping the name of a well-known political leader from a headline. I thought the situation was inherently humorous -- there I was getting legal advice of all things from the Cardinal Archbishop of New York. We hit it off so well I proposed another meeting for an interview with him, and he suggested I send him a written outline and proposal and he would certainly consider it.

A month later, I returned for the interview that became "A Nation In Need of Healing." While transcribing it, I was continually struck by the amazing literary quality of the Cardinal's ordinary conversation. If half the writers in America could write with the fluency O'Connor spoke, we would be an amazing country. I have done many interviews in my long career, but few went as fluently as this one.

O'CONNOR WAS A MAN very much in the world, though not of it. His ability to mix it with mayors and governors -- and still hold his own distinct ground -- is reflected in the book, "His Eminence and Hizzoner," which he co-authored with former Mayor Ed Koch. The book was a candid exchange on issues as diverse as racism, gay rights, homosexuality, housing, homelessness, abortion and euthanasia, yet it demonstrated more than anything else that the dialogue between leaders of church and state can be conducted on a basis of mutual respect.

To O'Connor, such a dialogue is urgently needed to heal the deeper wounds that divide us as a nation. Speaking with him, you got the feeling that this prelate really did love sinners, which may be the main reason for his success. If there is one thing New York has, it's an abundance of sinners.

Nevertheless, his relationship with some of his own, including former Governor Mario Cuomo of New York

and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was visibly chillier than his camaraderie with Koch. Without naming names, O'Connor was emphatic in stating that "bishops . . . are no longer amused by politicians who don't practice their Catholicism in their political life."

He frankly acknowledged that the issue of abortion is the line in the sand beyond which sufferance of political meanderings from traditional morality by Catholic political leaders must stop.

One of his heroes was the late Emanuel Cardinal Suhard, Archbishop of Paris, famed for two prophetic pastoral letters written in the late '40's and early '50's - "Priests Among Men," and "The Church Today: Growth or Decline?"

In the former, Suhard recognized the dilemma of the priest in a post-Christian, industrial world -- called at once to the high sanctity of a Cure D'Ars, including the difficult challenge of celibacy, and to a life among men -- often side by side, sharing the dirt and sweat of the industrial workplace, or coming home to a dingy apartment in the slums of Paris (the French worker priest movement was then underway.)

Today, contemporary clerical temptations in America are rather different -- the lures of materialism, of a spirit of the times characterized by cultural narcissism, and of a milieu saturated with sex and violence. Priests, too, can unfortunately get caught up in the times.

O'Connor recognized that. In his talks to his priests, he indicated his willingness to go anywhere and do anything to help the troubled priest; but he has also reached out compassionately to people and communities scarred by encounters with dysfunctional clerics, settling for nothing less than a full, open exchange between him and them "to bring about healing."

However, it was Suhard's second pastoral that identified the larger challenge represented by the rise of secular humanism with its condescending convictions about the irrelevance of religion to life.

Historically, it can be traced to the split between the church and the burgher class during the Renaissance that gave rise to a yawning secular-religious divide in the West's leading centers of learning. Philosophically, it is also related to dualistic divisions between the human and the divine dating back to early heresies concerning the divine and human natures of Christ.

Unfortunately, the Church all too often found itself rejecting the human in order to defend the divine and ended up on the other side of the divide from those who embraced humanity and rejected divinity. The result is today's celebration of human and scientific progress without the moral compass formerly provided by religious faith. Our own founding fathers were arguably

either the last of the old breed or the first of the new. Liberal constitutional lawyers, who simply ignore references to the deity in our founding documents, have clearly left them far behind..

Meanwhile, the answer to Suhard's prophetic question, "The Church Today: Growth or Decline?" is still troubling believers. Despite the demise of "atheistic Communism," religion is visibly in decline by almost every measure -- in sheer numbers of adherents, influence on public policy, frequency and intensity of religious practice, conformity to doctrine, religious and priestly vocations, financial resources, and far more significant than anything else -- the decline in belief and practice among the young.

Just count the proportion of gray heads in most Catholic churches at daily or Sunday masses. By and large, the ranks of the young have thinned considerably since the 'sixties.

Everything about our social and political life today, our media and educational systems, our economic and family life, clearly shouts: the post-Christian era Suhard was so concerned about is here, and to realists at least, there seems to be no turning back.

Fortunately, John O'Connor wasn't paid to be a realist. A Renaissance man, he seemed to comfortably reconcile within himself the ancient divisions between the human and the divine, between priests and people, between religion and life that kept his predecessors hidden away in their clerical powerhouses. At heart, as Jewish Mayor Koch said later, he was a *mensch*.

O'Connor was also patient, and seemed to see through the self-limiting swings of the political pendulum just as easily as he saw through the superficiality of previous religious revivals. In the long run, he may well prove to be right. Those who believe in life will most likely produce a larger percentage of the next generation of citizens than those who believe in abortion.

The homosexual life style - with its significantly reduced life expectancies (42 to 47 years for gays and lesbians versus 72 to 78 years for heterosexuals) and its near zero fertility rate - is similarly self-limiting. Yet we're only beginning to feel the full impact of a generation of such phenomena.

Meanwhile, radical, pro-choice feminism will generate its own backlash just as surely as the extremes of McCarthyism in the '50's, militarism in the '60's, the Nixonian era in the '70's, and Reaganomics in the '80's. In the end, human nature usually wins.

The Clinton era has clearly taken us to extremes of public toleration of decadence and political corruption never before experienced in our history. It was as if we had all become corrupted. Then the backlash fizzled

with the failed impeachment trial in the Senate, leaving the moral conservatives wrung out by sheer exhaustion. In the light of eternity in which Cardinals are trained to view things, even this may be a mere moment.

Nevertheless, O'Connor perceived a sense of hopelessness behind the pain we see in much of society today, an element that saps our moral energies, as evil often does, and leaves us helpless and confused.

In a talk to the Harvard Law Forum, he said, "There is a profound and pervasive anxiety, rooted in the reality that as a people we do have a heart, a warm and generous heart, but one that is experiencing an enduring heartache because we suspect that we have lost our way, that too many laws are morally sterile, too many public policies simply don't work, and can't be made to work for the good of all . . . we seem to have an acute anxiety that we are doing some things terribly wrong."

Today, his list reads like a litany of what needs healing in society today.

"We know there is something wrong as we pass the bag ladies and the bag men in the streets.

"We know there is something wrong about gentrification that flushes lonely, elderly people out of homes and apartments with absolutely no place to go.

"We know there is something wrong when drugs control and destroy our neighborhoods, when we can't build prisons fast enough to meet the demand.

"We know there is something wrong when the most incredible pornography is defended as freedom of speech, when child abuse reaches horrifying proportions, when people are disenfranchised or exploited because of where they were born or their sex or the color of their skin.

"We know there is something wrong in the sexual exploitation and violence that various agencies deal with every day in virtually every city, and in the hopelessness of burned-out buildings in cities all over America.

"We know there is something wrong in the Balkans and northern Ireland, in the Middle East, Asia and much of Africa.

"We know there is something terrifyingly wrong about the arms trade feeding conflicts everywhere, and the horrifying potential of nuclear weapons. . .

"All this and more pains us because we are basically a good people, a kind and merciful people, but the pain comes from knowing that we are doing some things terribly wrong and either we don't have the resolve to right them or we simply don't know how to right them."

It was thoughts like these that prompted me to seek the following interview with the Cardinal on his thoughts about "A Nation in Need of Healing." >>>

The Interview:

A Nation in Need of Healing

Howard: As a country and as a people, we seem to be terribly divided, perhaps more than at any time since the American Civil War. Hostility rather than civility is in the air, of race against race, men against women, rich against poor, believers against non-believers, criminals against ordinary citizens, and of course the fundamental issue of abortion vs. the right to life. There also seems to be more cynicism and distrust of political and other leaders than we have ever seen before.

What hope do you see of healing these wounds, these divisions, these differences?

O'Connor: I'm very hopeful. At the World Youth Congress in Denver, I think that not only did our Holy Father provide an entirely new momentum to us, but he revealed to us what's there in the hearts of these young people. They're just waiting to be set on fire.

At a separate session in Denver, I had 1,200 young New Yorkers with me and they were obviously hungry for the truth. They were hungry not for ambiguities, not for criticisms, not for what's wrong, but hungry to achieve their own potential, but always in accordance with the truth.

Unquestionably, we have incalculable problems. Anyone, I think, who would try to dismiss them would be naive or contemptuous. I was interested in your identifying the fundamental problem, the critical problem - abortion - because I do believe with Mother Theresa that we will have no end to war in the world, to unrest, to hatred, to divisiveness and discord until we generate a new respect for human life. This is what our Holy Father repeated over and over again in Denver. It's also what I see here in New York. It's a constant.

When you mentioned division, I thought instantly of Abraham Lincoln's famous "House Divided" speech.

I firmly believe that we will either be a free people without abortion or we will be a slave people, slaves to this violence against human life. Look at the incapacity, look at the debility, look at the paralysis we suffer as a nation, the paralysis right here in New York because of crime and violence.

It goes beyond apathy, beyond ennui, beyond indifference. There's fear on the streets. There's fear on the subways. There's fear of the political system.

I think it's not merely cynicism about the political system. It's fear of what the political system itself is capable of doing to a people, fear of the kinds of laws legislators are capable of passing, fear of what people in the executive branches of government will do to get elected. And always I think, even if people find it difficult to articulate, the fear is for their own lives. The fear is for the integrity of human life.

We use the term "quality of life" very loosely. People aren't looking for luxuries in the deepest recesses of their heart; they're looking for some kind of security, some kind of integrity of life, and they see it threatened every day.

But, paradoxically, I have a great deal of hope because people are worried, because people are fearful. People haven't yet lost a sense of dissonance between what should be and what is. That's when things will really be out of control, when people no longer feel that insecurity, when people feel comfortable with evil, when their hearts become hardened.

I think the most modern assessment that we can give would be from the first chapter of St. Paul to the Romans. People's hearts have become hardened, their consciences darkened, and they don't see the difference between right and wrong, between the normal and abnormal, between decency and perversion.

There is a great deal of that kind of blindness today, but there are far more people who recognize perversity as perversity, who recognize evil as evil, and they are frustrated and they're angry. I haven't lost hope because that frustration is there. People still have a spark of life, a spark of fire.

That's what we could see in Denver when the Holy Father's helicopter began approaching the stadium and, later, when it approached the huge open field. In the stadium there were 90,000 people, and in the open field there were over 300,000 and the roars that went up were tremendously uplifting.

I saw the same thing a few years ago. I was part of the youth pilgrimage in *Santiago de Compostello*, so it is not just a local phenomenon. The hunger is universal.

Howard: Isn't the basic clash one between two views of man? One of man as moral, mortal and des-



tinged for eternal happiness and the other of man as a law unto himself, entirely capable of controlling his own destiny? Salvation through divine grace vs. salvation through technology?

Is that a fair statement of the dilemma?

O'Connor: That may be a little bit too neat. I think perhaps there is another view that is even more hopeless than the one that sees salvation in technology or sees man as sufficient unto himself, and that's the view that is too widely shared that sees no hope of salvation, does not even admit the concept of salvation here and now.

I see a kind of nihilism in certain segments of society which is quite like that taught by Jean Paul Sartre and which gripped much of France, much of North Africa when Camus was writing, a kind of fatalism, a sense of complete meaninglessness in life, so that they don't even talk about technological progress or even about man's being sufficient unto himself.

I've always been a reader of Dostoevsky, and in "The Brothers Karamazov," you have Ivan, one of the three brothers who is a skeptic and an intellectual, saying to Alyosha, who represents a kind of saint, "It is not, Alyosha, that I don't believe in God. I just want to return the entrance ticket."

What he meant was that all of this just doesn't mean anything. What God has done is utterly useless, an exercise in futility.

If you walk up and down some of the streets of New York in the evening, past the bars where many young folks stop on their way home from work, you get the feeling that they think almost everything is meaningless. There's no point in even talking about it, of trying to define it, no point in even asking whether two and two make four. It doesn't matter anymore.

There is some of that in our society today and it's a third dimension, a more hopeless dimension to the two categories that you mentioned.

Howard: You grew up in a period that suggests an interesting parallel not totally different from today. You had the Roaring Twenties followed by the great depression with radical movements of both the left and the right, and then a terrible World War.

And yet after the war, in addition to economic rebuilding, there seemed to be a renewed spiritual thirst symbolized on the popular level by people like Thomas Merton, Bishop Sheen, the Christophers, Billy Graham and others. Do you see any signs of a similar religious and spiritual revival today?

O'Connor: I was a kid during the twenties so that I

remember the Wall Street crash much more clearly, the stories of wealthy people jumping from ten story windows and the horrible spiritual depression that invaded everything. I remember seeing men that my father would tell me were engineers, lawyers, and professionals literally standing in bread lines or selling that proverbial "depression apple" on the corner.

Then as World War II began developing, there was a peculiar kind of enthusiasm that gripped the country even though young men were going off to war or were dying in the war. There was a sense of nationalism, a sense of patriotism, a sense of fervor, a sense that the United States was going to create a new world. And that stimulated a very dynamic period of American life during the 1940's.

A lot of it was economic with people working two jobs or working overtime and doubletime and they were making money they had never dreamed of before.

Then there were people who were going to different parts of the world that they had never known existed and were coming back alive with new experiences, having met people they had never met before, and out of all of this, there grew a kind of religious fervor.

There were surprising numbers of men coming back from the war who were joining Trappist monasteries and other religious communities. They wanted to go back as missionaries to places they had seen in the Pacific and Asia.

It was also a period when people would sit on the living room floor on a Sunday afternoon listening to Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen and The Catholic Hour; and then after the war when things became more sophisticated, it was Bishop Fulton Sheen on television.

And, yes, there were lots of people going to church, but there was always a certain veneer to that. During the war, people were constantly making novenas and going to Mass in great numbers to pray for the end of the war and for their sons and husbands to come home safely. But after the war one didn't see a great surge of spiritual gratitude by huge numbers of people. Still there was this compensatory phenomenon of people entering monasteries, entering the religious life.

It was a very interesting period from a religious point of view. These were the days of Thomas Merton and Clare Luce and the interest in their conversion experiences. Those of us who were in college at that time were reading Myles Connolly's "Mr. Blue," and a steady stream of Merton's books, of course.

Bernanos was coming on the scene with "Diary of a Country Priest" and Graham Greene with his elliptical, quasi-spiritual novels, and we got excited about people like Evelyn Waugh and Leon Bloy, and later Flannery

O'Connor. Catholic literary critics were just waiting for someone to come along and write the great Catholic novel. But then a lot of that just seemed to fade away.

Are we back in that kind of period now? Not quite. We've gone through too many wars since then. And we've become disenchanted.

Howard: Referring to your comment about some of that religious fervor being a veneer, I recently ran across this quote from a 1958 article by Fr. Andrew Greeley talking about that same religious revival:

"The mass media reflect this new interest in things religious. It is hard to escape from religious songs on juke boxes, religious speakers on TV, religious articles in magazines, and religious movies in Cinemascope. The national taste has gone in for religion in a big way."

Today, one would have to wonder what planet he was on. If anything, the media today would appear to be leading the way in mocking religious values. Everywhere one turns, religion and morality seem to be fair game, and divisions about fundamental issues seem to run deeper than ever.

Does this trouble you?

O'Connor: It troubles me very deeply, but I can still see the potential of a great good in it. For too long a time there was danger in our forgetting that the church is always countercultural. When the culture seems to be completely sympathetic with the church, there is always danger of the church being lulled into the values of the culture rather than experiencing a sense of urgency about converting the culture.

Nevertheless, I think this culture can be converted. I think that some of those who are most bitterly attacking the church right now will be prime subjects for conversion because they are not indifferent. This, to me, is the most interesting phenomenon.

It's true, as Father Greeley says, that there were religious hymns on juke boxes and religious movies coming out of Hollywood, but I think this may have been an unconscious effort to create a kind of "feel-good" religion of the masses. It was after all in the wake of World War II, and there was a desire for harmony, a desire for peace.

Movies like *"Going My Way"* seemed harmless enough, and of course those of us who were Catholic, and young at the time, felt wonderful and thought: "Isn't it great that so many people see the church as we think it is." But I think this turned out to be an illusion. We expected people to begin falling all over themselves to become Catholics, and we were lulled into believing that good will toward Catholicism would endure.

However, it doesn't work that way because Catholicism is the religion of the crucifixion. Catholicism is the religion of self denial, of discipline, the religion of that Christ who told us that the disciple can never be greater than the Master. I think that idea got subordinated, not deliberately or maliciously, but people were saying things like, "Gee, the church isn't so bad. It's one big, happy family. It's open to everybody, and they're really not as demanding as we thought they were."

Now we're being jolted out of that.

One of the reasons I'm optimistic is that the church excites such antagonism. The culture can't forget us, the culture can't ignore us. Leading television personalities have to mock the church, artists have to use religious symbolism to make their points. The more spectacular they want to be, the more they attack the church, the more we are forced to be what we're supposed to be.

Howard: Recently, I covered a Right to Life convention and I met two people who seem to confirm your point. One was Dr. Bernard Nathanson, a former abortionist who is now one of the leading medical spokesmen against abortion. The other was the man who invented the red coat hanger symbol that was used in the demonstrations for abortion on the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral in the early '70's. He borrowed a supply of coat hangars from his local dry cleaner and painted them red, and that's how that symbol came into being. And here he was coming back to the other side of that same issue 20 years later to attend a Right to Life convention. So it does hit people in paradoxical ways.

The other interesting thing to me was that the people I interviewed there didn't fit any description you might read in the media about "right to life people." They were a broad cross-section of people from all walks of life and all persuasions -- liberal, conservative, middle of the road -- men, women, families with kids -- hardly a hotbed of "right wing extremism." Most seemed to have been drawn by some profound personal experience - like the birth of a Down's Syndrome child, or for their own spiritual reasons, or simply the pain they felt over the current drift of society toward violence and a deterioration in family life.

O'Connor: That says something again. To be venomous toward the church, you have to invent a monster that doesn't exist because you can't face the reality of what is. This is a profoundly non-violent movement, and we deeply disapprove of anyone who would make it otherwise.

I'm glad you mention Dr. Nathanson, whom I have known for some years. When I first met him, he intro-

duced himself to audiences as a Jewish atheist. Then he began introducing himself to audiences as Jewish. Then he began introducing himself as a believer in God, and slowly one got the impression that he was attracted by the notion of Christ. And since then of course, he has become a convert to Catholicism.

You cannot take life seriously until you recognize its sacredness, until you recognize that every human person is made in the image and likeness of God. All other pro-life efforts ultimately fail if you are not rooted in that. It's remarkable, isn't it, that Our Lord said, "A little child shall lead them," and now these little unborn children are leading so many people to a totally new understanding of themselves, of faith, of God.

Howard: There is another sense in which Christians and Catholics and their churches have failed that led to complicity in the decline in values. For a long time, it was convenient to have a more or less passive laity who passed the plate and didn't rock the boat. But when the church needed vigorous defenders of the faith out in the marketplace, they weren't there.

Where are the courageous Catholic politicians, screenwriters, business leaders, commentators, and intellectuals when you need them? And why do so many just fade into the wallpaper?

Does the church bear any responsibility for this? Or are Catholics themselves simply too detached, too timid, or too caught up in the spirit of the times, as Pope John Paul II has suggested in one of his letters?

O'Connor: I think it's both. For years the hierarchical church, if you will, took a *laissez faire* attitude toward lay persons, and an almost benevolent or paternalistic attitude toward crooked politicians, toward Mafia types, toward Catholics who were just beginning to come into their own. The church didn't seem to expect too much of them.

Abortion, again, has made a difference. A great number of bishops now are no longer amused by politicians who don't practice their Catholicism in their political life. We are no longer amused by politicians who may be hearty and enthusiastic toward the local priest or bishop, or who may even be contributors to the church, but who leave that all behind when they get into the legislature or into political office.

The same is true of people in commerce, people in industry. Why is it that we have some very highly placed Catholics in television, for example, but so far as it can be discerned, they seem to exercise no influence on the industry at all? We have lots of Catholics, nominal or otherwise, writing in the media. How few of

them seem to take their Catholicism seriously.

Sure, I think we have some responsibility, too. I call it the hierarchical church because we're essentially the ones who run the schools, the parishes, the institutions, and who do the preaching on Sundays. But a lot of preaching has become pat. I don't think there is any doubt about that at all. For a long period of time, it was difficult to hear any kind of substantive homily. I'm not talking about hellfire and damnation, to use the proverbial description, but substantive.

Our greatest problem has been our failure to use our schools and our pulpits to transmit what the church really teaches, this magnificent teaching of the gospel, the gospel of good news. Too often we water it down.

Why deny it? There have been some nominally Catholic schools where the faith has been ridiculed, where substantive teaching has been relegated to a fraction of the curriculum.

I try to tell our priests that if we don't use that precious little time we have on Sundays, where are the people going to get the teaching?

Seventy-five per cent of our youngsters don't go to Catholic schools. Some who do go to Catholic schools don't get the best in religious teaching. They may get the best in reading writing, and arithmetic, but they don't get the best in religious teaching. If we don't give them solid stuff when they come to Mass on Sunday, when and where are they going to get it?

I think we have developed a body of Catholics in which only a fractional percentage have a firm grasp of even the rudiments of our faith.

A good example are the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. The Council published 16 basic documents. You will find a lot of people who say the church should conform to the spirit of Vatican II, but you will go a long way before you find anyone who has read a single document from Vatican II.

A major fault was that we didn't prepare people for the Council; and in the wake of the Council, we didn't communicate the substance of the teachings of the Council. We depended on this amorphous thing called the "Spirit of the Council." Well, then, the teachings of the Council got distorted to mean whatever anyone wants it to mean.

Howard: In the '50's and '60's, there were quite a few movements in the church, particularly among lay people in the social action field, the retreat movement and the like. Groups like the Christian Family Movement, The Cursillo Movement, Marriage Encounter, Young Christian Students and Young Christian Workers, the Catholic Worker, Friendship House, the Catho-

lic Interracial Councils, a whole long list. A lot of this activity was self-sustaining and didn't require a great deal of supervision from the clergy, although the lines of communication were very open. Today much of this has simply disappeared or grown quiescent.

The Catholic press, too, had many articulate young writers and editors, but it too has come upon lean days. Many publications bit the dust without much of a fight to save them. We seem to have lost our nerve. But the effect was almost as devastating as the shutdown of the Catholic press behind the Iron Curtain at the height of the cold war. The truth is that without a strong media presence in our society, you risk disappearing. You can't even buy a Catholic newspaper on a neighborhood newsstand, although you can buy almost anything else.

The question is: have we cooperated too willingly in our own demise?

O'Connor: I think we have, but I don't say that by way of blame. I think we have to distinguish between the very sad reality and who is responsible for it. At times, we have passively cooperated in our own demise, except that we are guaranteed that the church will last for the rest of time. That's very comforting, but at the same time it can lead us into complacency.

It's a tremendously busy church now. Every bishop is confronted with an almost infinite number of problems and demands, with the need to raise and expend formidable financial resources and I think we've fallen into what is done in the secular world. We are tempted to develop a bottom-line mentality.

What do we see disappearing most rapidly right now in the country? The Catholic school -- because it's so hard to sustain economically and it's difficult to force yourself to make the sacrifices. It's difficult for a bishop to keep pushing the people, to keep pushing pastors to do what's necessary to keep Catholic schools going.

As for Catholic media, I think we're partly the victims of Toffler's "future shock." The amount of data coming at us constantly crowds out of our minds even our sense of need. Just try reading one of our bulkier Sunday newspapers. There is no time. The need is there, the hunger is there, but this constant battering by the data stream turns people off. We no longer recognize our true needs. We can't see what we are missing.

And then, despite all the alleged luxury, people are working terribly hard. In how many families do you have both parents working? Both parents get home at night exhausted, and television is a convenient soporific. You don't have to think to watch it. Every once in a while, there will be some good, spiritually uplifting program; but even that is going to require some thought

just as a serious magazine would.

Howard: A not uncommon complaint I hear in the pro-life movement is the need for more active support by the clergy, and occasionally you hear the same story from other movements such as 12-step recovery programs like AA. There are wonderful exceptions, of course, but certainly, many more Irish Catholics achieve sobriety in the basements of Protestant churches than almost anywhere else. It's interesting that both of these movements cross religious lines.

Yet it's in movements like these where the miracles are happening these days. It's in the church basements, in storefronts in the South Bronx, in rehabs and jails where people get clean and sober, or in pregnancy centers where they counsel young women who are confronted by the terrible decision whether to abort their child or cherish and nurture it. Yet, spiritually, this is where the action is because here's where people are facing major personal crises and making major personal and spiritual decisions to turn their lives and wills over to the care of God as they understand him.

What is the church doing to bring this same kind of spiritual healing into the ordinary life of people so that they can see in the loss of a job or the failure of a relationship, or some other personal crisis, an opportunity to respond to God's grace and at the same time to reach out and help other people?

O'Connor: That's a fascinating way to put the question. I think that through the years both the support and leadership of the pro-life movement on the part of bishops has grown immensely. I have seen an extraordinary development in that regard throughout the United States. Now you can just count on the support and leadership of bishops. It has taken more time to catch on among parish priests in general with many exceptions, and certainly time to take hold among religious, again with significant exceptions.

Your question goes beneath this kind of support and calls for a distinction between ordinarily structured parish life as we know it and movements within the church. You mentioned the charismatic movement, the Cursillo movement. These movements, almost quintessentially Catholic, sometimes have difficulty finding themselves in a structured parish. By definition, this is the way a parish works; but a movement is much more free-flowing. I'm not at all sure this isn't a good thing. We do a certain amount of structuring for people who are in AA. For example, a woman in AA came to me recently and told me she had been stunned by the number of women she knew in the program who have

had 3, 4, or 5 abortions -- whether they had them when they were active in their addiction or not, I'm not sure -- but she asked whether we couldn't set up something explicitly geared to this, and we are in the process of doing so right now.

Howard: A sort of Abortions Anonymous? Or Life Anonymous?

O'Connor: No, something explicitly for alcoholics who have had abortions. Could it become an Abortions Anonymous? Perhaps, but we already have in *Project Rachel*, and *Coming to Grief with the Unborn*, programs helping a tremendous number of people who have had abortions pick up the pieces of their lives. But this was something I hadn't taken note of before that suggested a correlation between alcoholism and abortions, though whether there is a cause and effect relationship we don't know. But here's an example of a new movement that started itself and that we will now try to encourage and possibly help structure.

There are many Catholic churches, by the way, that do support AA. I know one of our Catholic churches in the mid-city where there are 35 AA meetings every week, so we are not lacking in support of recovery programs like AA.

The first prayer that I say every morning is to ask God to keep me from preventing anybody from doing good. A bishop can be very powerful as a negative

force. If he didn't dream up an idea . . . if it's not structured . . . if it's not organized . . . if it's not supported by the front office . . . Who's this person to be doing this? . . . Who does she think she is? . . . Who does he think he is?

These movements, I think, come within that category. It is quite possible that the greatest help we can give them in their infancy is to let them be inspired by the Holy Spirit, to see how they develop.

The probability is, at least in some cases, that they'll grow and prosper and become more and more dynamic almost to the degree that you don't try to bring them into a system.

Howard: Another example of independent action by lay people is William Bennett's group, the American Education Association, which seeks to provide an impetus for new approaches in public and private education. I'm sure Bennett didn't wait for his bishop to prod him into coming up with this idea and then doing something about it. He's just going ahead and doing it with other like minded people. Why is that so rare? Why do so few lay people consider getting together to take action when major problems confront us? Are we apathetic or just too busy?

O'Connor: People are seriously preoccupied and I think the greater number of people simply want to be able to live. We have so many causes, some more



legitimate than others, some more serious than others. Bill Bennett of course can muster a great deal of financial support. He has, I assume, enough time apart from having to make a living that he can devote himself to such a cause. The bishops of the United States have been trying for years and years to bring about a really effective television network, the Bishops Network, yet Paul Weyrich, a conservative, has established a network — National Empowerment Television — that is supported by contributed funds. Doing something like that is tremendously difficult for ordinary people. There are a lot of pragmatic reasons why more is not done.

To get people to night meetings in New York, for example, is very difficult for safety reasons. A great many churches of all persuasions are locked all day long. They're open only for services. Most people want to do the right thing, they want to live the right way, but they are asked to do so much, there are so many demands made on them - I'm talking about the sheer problem of trying to make a living, to get the kids to Little League, to Scouts, to Sunday school. It's difficult.

Howard: Another big obstacle to people stepping out to meet problems is the question of denial. We'd rather not face the ugly fact that things are starting to go terribly wrong, or that our kids will be adversely affected by what they watch on television because they're "good kids." But then they come home at 3:15 p.m., and turn on a popular talk show to see some woman demonstrating how to use a female condom. In my opinion, such a show at that hour amounts to sexual abuse of children. If the show's host was wearing a roman collar, he would have been arrested for it.

O'Connor: Yes, he would have.

Howard: It also illustrates the denial. What would not be considered appropriate for an adult to demonstrate one-to-one with a child is considered completely appropriate on the public airwaves at a time when a large part of the viewing audience is composed of children. Yet try to argue that with people who believe that almost anything having to do with sex is okay on television. When I was a kid, the hour from 4 to 5 p.m. was the "children's hour" on radio --The Green Hornet, Dick Tracy, Jack Armstrong and Uncle Don were standard fare. Now it's Jerry Springer, Maury Povich, Sally Jesse Raphael, Oprah, Geraldo, and Montel. Why not put Rush Limbaugh on at that hour? At least, he's non-violent and fairly clean.

On the subject of abortion, the denial is so embedded that it amounts to a kind of self-imposed censorship

of the media by the media of any opposing set of facts that might weaken the case for abortion. I recently interviewed Joel Brind, Ph.D., a professor of endocrinology at Baruch College, who has collected numerous studies from all over the world showing that the incidence of breast cancer is significantly greater among women who have abortions than among women who carry their pregnancies to term. Brind says, "Delaying or avoiding childbirth by abortion has long-run lethal effects. It is a national scandal that women aren't told this before they consider an abortion." He also believes that legalization of the French abortion pill RU-486 is likely to send breast cancer rates soaring.

Brind tried repeatedly to get this story into *The New York Times* and they wouldn't touch it. Meanwhile, they're publishing inconclusive studies about diet and breast cancer or about abortion itself as a women's "health" issue. So here we have this terrible contradiction that amounts to misleading women about two of the most vital issues affecting their lives -- abortion and breast cancer. But the monumental denial says it's not only okay to suppress this information, but it's politically correct to do so.

As a journalist, I find this disturbing. If you have a story that can materially affect the lives of so many people, there is a moral and ethical responsibility to pursue it and publish it. But the main question here is the denial that supports the refusal to face the realities surrounding such issues.

O'Connor: I suspect that an awful lot of denial is conscious and deliberate, but then over the course of time it starts functioning at the unconscious level and becomes a deeper kind of denial. The problem doesn't exist. The reality doesn't exist.

I think that a huge number of women, despite fraudulent arguments to the contrary, suffer terrible post-abortion trauma. The guilt is just shattering. We see it in *Project Rachel* when they come to pick up the pieces. We see two kinds of denial at work there. Doctors and social workers will deny that women are going to experience this kind of stress, so they become enablers to denial. And then after the fact, the same abortionists deny that the women's trauma exists. They'll say the only reason a woman feels guilty is that we tell her she should feel guilty. They don't see anything natural about this, anything in the nature of a woman that would bring this about. And yet there it is, and in some instances the guilt and shame are more than she can bear so she, too, goes into a state of denial.

The concept of denial opens up fascinating possibilities, not only about abortion, but about so many things

in our society. To take one of your examples, it's hard for us to believe - because we don't want to believe it - that television can sink so low, for instance. So we'll provide some sort of rationalization for it. Well, if he did this, he did it for some perfectly valid reason, and that can be a form of denial. Denial is a very useful tool not to have to do anything about a problem.

Howard: There is of course a healthy kind of denial. If we didn't have denial we wouldn't be able to cross the street in the morning. The soldier going into battle has to have denial: the next bullet might have his name on it and he can't think about that. On the other hand denial can lead to self-destruction; the denial of the alcoholic or addict before he hits bottom, for example. He almost has to crash before the denial can be shattered and he can begin recovering.

The woman who has been led to believe that abortion represents a positive alternative for her is in the pre-crash phase. She wants to believe that it's going to free her to advance her career or her education, or to minimize or escape the pain of a bad personal experience, when it may in fact only lead to a deeper trauma. The women you describe in this post-abortion trauma are in the crash phase when they are fully experiencing shame, loss and grief from the death of their children.

That's after the fact. Denial usually works before the fact. We're worried about global warming and saving the whales, but we're not worried about 1,500,000 babies being killed. It's so contradictory, it tears the mind apart.

We almost have to treat the whole society as if we're doing an intervention on an active drug addict. We have to create new ways to break through the denial. And that means marshalling all the facts we can to help women, in particular, become aware of the full picture about abortion, like the breast cancer connection or post-abortion syndrome.

O'Connor: Denial is a concept we certainly have to explore. You can make yourself feel pretty good if you lead a crusade about the destruction of the snail darter or whales. People will be polite to you. It's the politically correct thing to do. And then you can just deny the horror of a million and a half deaths by abortion every year. You can deny the growing phenomenon in the United States in which legislature after legislature will try to get through legislation favoring euthanasia or assisted suicide.

A few years ago, Kevorkian was looked upon as a monster. He is now looked at by many people as a folk hero. We deny the monstrosity of encouraging people to

put themselves to death for reasons such as alleged overpopulation or the high cost of caring for the elderly. We say, "Well, you've lived out your usefulness. You'll be doing everybody a favor by putting yourself out of your misery."

That's very real denial of what's actually happening.

Howard: Another prospect suggested by Dr. Nathanson is the prospect that fetal tissue research has brought the technology within reach to permit selected individuals to live 300 to 500 years using replacement glands and organs from freshly aborted babies. He predicted the likelihood of fetal tissue farms located in developing countries to meet the fetal tissue requirements of a highly privileged, affluent, aging population in the industrialized countries who can afford to pay for it. Now we hear of experiments with cloning human embryos potentially for the same purpose. Parents could conceive a child, clone an identical twin of it and save it for possible future use as a fetal transplant.

Hearing this, one begins to understand why elements in our society want to move forward quickly with such research, with government funded abortions, and with bureaucratic control of our health care system. It sounds like an Orwellian nightmare, yet according to Dr. Nathanson, the prospect is real and fairly immediate.

How do you regard such a prospect?

O'Connor: I haven't spoken to Dr. Nathanson about that, but it is Orwellian. Some years ago, I was asked to give a talk at an Institute of Science and Religion at Marquette University. It was a symposium on The Nature of War in the Twenty-First Century and I talked at that time about what was already in the literature: the potential of genetically developing human beings or creatures who would be tailored specifically to wage war, to repair satellites, and to work in outer space. They would be genetically engineered to withstand the near vacuum of space. Their arms would be elongated to reach out from space craft, and like so many things that once sounded like science fiction such as walking on the moon, this sounded like science fiction. But it was in the serious military technology literature assessing the nature of war in the Twenty-First Century.

So I'm not at all shocked by what Dr. Nathanson predicts here as a very real possibility. He is a developmental scientist. He associates with some very important and knowledgeable geneticists, and I would have to take seriously and fearfully what he says about this.

Sadly the gross immorality of it should be self-evident, but I suspect, again through this phenomenon

of denial, you'll have a certain number of people who will say: "Well, look at the lives you can save or extend. Look at the good you can do."

There's always this eugenic streak that flashes throughout the world; it doesn't differ substantially from the eugenic approach of the Nazis in which they were going to develop this superhuman race, this *Uebermensch*, who would not only be more capable than anyone else physically and mentally, but who would be above all bourgeois morals. He would create his own morality. It doesn't surprise me.

Howard: Women, of course, are central to these issues, particularly the life issue, and they were certainly sold short in the past when they were dismissed as "just housewives." There always was so much more to women's life and to their role as teachers and nurturers, creators and managers.

But today women are being cheated of something else. The unique power of women is that they hold the future in their wombs. Without women responsibly exercising their nurturing function, there will be no future, at least no future worth talking about. You can see that in what's happening today with sex and violence among children. Women play a central role at the heart of the family, of the culture, and of the society. What are your closing comments on that?

O'Connor: There is little question that we didn't recognize and perhaps even today do not recognize the full potential of womanhood. I don't think we ignored the potential of womanhood completely, but we emphasized certain aspects of it. Certain developments on the part of women were highly lauded; others were not even thought about. It was another kind of denial.

During World War II again, a lot of women became riveters and built airplanes and wore hardhats. Others became pilots and ferried aircraft to war zones. Still others went as nurses into battle zones. American women were seen in a new light for the first time. Most performed courageously, but then it was assumed after the war was over that women would go right back into the home. I think Our Holy Father has spelled this out very well in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, his encyclical on the dignity of women, and he won't let up on the fact that the maternal and the child-bearing potential of women must always be given primacy in the very nature of things. I agree with him completely on that.

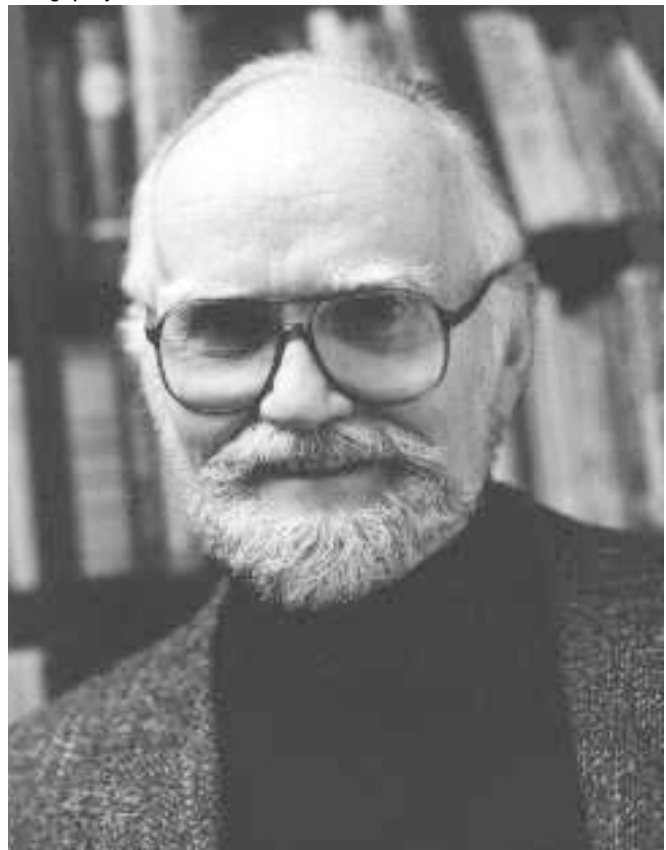
However, it shouldn't be allowed to preclude the actualization of other potentials of women. Our danger now is that society is bringing into ridicule, almost into contempt those elements of womanhood that are most

natural to her. We once lightly used the term "only a housewife." Now we are using it again but with more contempt than it was ever used before.

I suspect, and this is a top of the mind reflection, that none of these evils such as abortion or pornography or a great deal of the sexual violence and permissiveness will be alleviated until we think through, pray through, and truly recognize the dignity of women and their extraordinary natural potential. Women suffer more than anyone else because of abortion, because of sexual degradation, because of pornography.

Look at what women have lost, and look at what they have gained. One is as terrifying as the other has been gratifying. □

Photograph by Anne Howard



Dennis M. Howard is the founder and President of the Movement for a Better America, Inc. He recently celebrated 50 years as a writer, journalist, and creative marketing director. He began his career as a founding staff member of The Sun Herald, an attempt to start a Catholic daily newspaper in October, 1950, and has since worked "in every medium known to man." His wide-ranging experience in creative communications has contributed immensely to the innovative approach he takes to using the media to help build a pro-life, pro-family majority in America. He believes, "It all comes down to touching hearts and changing minds."

Helping to Build a Pro-Life Majority

Forty million abortions are an incredible waste of human lives. And yet, for lack of a broad moral consensus, the banal, evil reality of abortion continues. The answer is to build a solid pro-life majority in America by touching hearts and changing minds through compassionate education. Only that and prayer can solve the problem. That's why we are dedicated to developing innovative educational approaches to communicating the pro-life message.

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MBA's Campaign for Life is raising the economic impact of abortion to the level of a national issue. Now it is at the heart of a rapidly developing economic crisis that promises to bring to an end both the hegemony of the liberal welfare state and the secular bull market on Wall Street. Globally, Peter Drucker calls it "the No. 1 Management Challenge of the 21st Century."

This is an issue that will change minds, and these are the ads that can do it. We've already heard from people in all 50 states, and from as far away as Moscow, Rome, and Madagascar. Your gift of \$100 will enable us to reach 18,000 households with a single ad. Warren Buffett, David Packard, and Ted Turner are spending billions to promote anti-people programs.

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MBA's "Celebrate Life" seminars for teens are achieving a 40% increase in teens who hold pro-life views. They help make teens more aware of the pitfalls in attitudes and behavior that lead to unexpected pregnancies. Teens are responding with enthusiasm to this positive, reality-based approach. Building a pro-life future starts with today's young people.

To schedule a "Celebrate Life" seminar, contact us today.

"Hope & Healing" Seminars for Women & Men

A "Hope & Healing" Seminar for post-abortive women and men is a powerful healing experience. It's also an opportunity for caring friends to minister to the grief and hurt experienced by the 1 out of 4 adults who are abortion's living victims. When they find healing and forgiveness, they become powerful witnesses for life. They are designed for use by pregnancy centers and faith-based post-abortion ministries. To find out more, contact us.

Crisis Pregnancy Center Program

Crisis Pregnancy Centers are the frontline of the pro-life movement, and MBA's CPC communications program is just what they need to make their presence felt at the grass roots level in every community they serve. Every new program we develop is available for use by crisis pregnancy centers, and we provide them with valuable tools to enhance client and community relations, and build fund-raising support. Your gift helps us do it.

For information about these programs, call, write, or email us today.

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