

Imagine you and a friend are at an art museum. You stop in front of a particularly beautiful painting of a sunset. But you don't see just see sunset, you see the light of God illuminating His creation. This leads you to meditate upon the nature of the created world, our place in it, and God's plan to save us from ourselves. So you are standing there letting this painting draw your heart and mind to reflect upon God and suddenly your friend nudges you and says, "that's a nice frame, isn't it?"

Saint Paul pretty much divides people into two camps, those who live in the flesh, and those who live in the spirit. Those who live in the flesh are people of the moment. They are of the world and can only see things in terms of what they can physically see, or touch, or feel. The transcendent is lost on them. They are people of the age. That's what the word secular or secularist means, "of the age."

People of the spirit on the other hand see a bigger picture than the one framed by the secularists. The spiritists know that there is more to our existence than what is immediately in front of us. They know, we know, that there is a life after this one, and that what we do in this world will matter in the world to come, it will matter a lot.

But the secular world denies that there is anything beyond what we perceive with our physical senses. And it is not enough that they perceive the world in such a limited way, they want everyone

else to see the world the way they do. This limited world view ignores the greater reality of our existence.

If you were asked to name the cause of the Civil War in one word, you would likely respond with the answer “slavery.” But “slavery” is only the frame the secularists have put around the issue. The War Between the States was caused by a disagreement over state’s rights. Where does the authority of the individual state end, and the authority of the federal government begin? That is a very important question. It is a question so important that the answer affects how we are governed today. And we had to go to war with each other to sort it out.

This is what the secularists do, those who live in the flesh, or as Saint Paul also describes them, those who work in darkness, afraid of the light. They cannot or will not see the bigger picture. They prefer to focus on the frame. And if that isn’t pitiable enough, they insist that we focus on the frame as well, ignoring the real issues.

This has been going on for a long time. Almost six hundred years ago Saint Thomas More stood up to his king, Henry VIII. The popular notion is that the point of their contention, over which Saint Thomas lost his life, was divorce. Henry wanted a divorce, the Church would not dissolve a valid sacramental marriage, and so Henry, in a massive pout, broke with the Catholic Church and set up his own.

But it wasn't about divorce, that's just the frame. Saint Thomas opposed Henry over the issue of the moral authority of the Church. Where does the authority of the state end and the transcendent authority of the Church begin?

What is the authority of the Church? As Catholics what do we believe about the teachings of the Church when it comes to faith and morals? It is one of our most basic tenets. God came to earth and assumed our human nature in order to teach us. He established His Church so that He could continue to teach us even though He no longer walked among us. When the Church speaks on matters of faith and morals it is not the bishops speaking to us, it is God speaking to us through His Church.

And we know, deep in our hearts, that the Church speaks the Truth because the law of God is written on our hearts.

Saint Thomas More saw this was the real issue. He recognized this as the great battle of his age, just as Saint Thomas a Becket recognized it four hundred years before that, and lost his life defending the authority of God in His Church.

It is a battle that will always be with us. And today, in our age, and in our time, it has flared up again. This is not about politics. This is not about republicans vs. democrats or liberals vs. conservatives. The current debate in this country is not about birth control, women's health, or gender ideology. It is about the moral authority of the Church and the free expression of religion.

It is about a right guaranteed to us by the founding documents of this country, which clearly state that congress shall pass no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion.

But they will certainly try. Earlier this week the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome confirmed that the Church has no power or authority to bless same sex unions. For the servants of God, those who follow Christ, this is not news, we always knew this to be the case. But for the worldly, this is an example of the hateful doctrines of the Catholic Church.

Does the world hates us? I think it is very clear now that it does. The world, that is the people of the world, the secularists, hate us, not because of who we are but because of what we represent. We represent an authority greater than any secular power. Ultimately we do not answer to our governments, we answer to God. We are the servants of God. Jesus makes it very clear in the Gospel that His fate and the fate of His servants are intertwined. "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there also will my servant be." He speaks of dying, of losing one's life, in order to bear much fruit. Sometimes losing one's life means a physical loss of life such as our martyrs, Saint Thomas More and Saint Thomas a Becket. Sometimes losing one's life means to turn away from the flesh and follow the Spirit. And when we do that, in a very real sense we then became dead to the secular world. And such devotion and courage and faith in a power that cannot be

regulated, has been a threat to totalitarian regimes all the way back to the Roman Empire and the first days of the Church.

In our country, in our own time, the Church has been driven out of facilitating adoptions over the “frame” of fairness and tolerance. Has this resulted in more adoptions? No, fewer, because no one, not even the social services centered government, has stepped in to fill the void left by the Church.

What will happen if the Catholic Church is driven from the health care business? In 2010 more than 600 Catholic facilities treated over 100 million patients, and much of that treatment was given at a financial loss to the institutions. If the Catholic Church in America is forced out of health care, by a government that demands we act contrary to our beliefs, who will step in to fill that gap?

In the movie “A Man for All Seasons,” a movie about Thomas More’s struggle with Henry VIII, Saint Thomas tries to show the real issue by posing the question “what if Parliament were to pass a law saying that God should not be God?” That is the point we are at today. Our own government is trying to tell us that our beliefs must give way to a secularist point of view. “This is not reform, this war upon the Church” ... “an attack upon the Church is an attack upon God, the devil’s work, done by the devil’s minister.”

Our response to this worldliness, our response to a world that wants to separate us from God, is to move closer to Him.

The more we experience Jesus as our Savior, the more we will experience the abundant life, the interior peace, wisdom, strength, and meaning, that comes with his salvation.

But because our culture is so secularized, we have to make an effort to let him be our Savior.

As Lent draws to a close there are a couple of things we can do.

First, we can choose to spend time with Jesus in prayer, even if, from a practical, technical standpoint, prayer may seem like a waste of time.

Second, we can choose to spend time serving others who are suffering and in need.

The traditional name for this kind of Christian charity is almsgiving.

We all know people who are suffering.

They may be suffering economically - their marriage and family life stressed by financial pressures beyond their control.

They may be suffering physically - their body and mind weakened or ravaged by disease, injury, or old age.

They may be suffering emotionally - working through an experience of betrayal, infidelity, or loss.

They may be suffering existentially - wondering why they are on the planet and where they can find a reason for living.

As Catholics, we experience those same forms of suffering, but we know what to do with them.

We bring them to Christ, our all-powerful, all-wise, and all-loving Savior; we grip our crucifixes; we offer them to the Father for the salvation of souls and the reparation of sins.

In the few remaining weeks of Lent, let's reach out and help lighten someone else's cross, just as our Savior constantly helps lighten ours.

This is how we fight the great battle of our age, not with demonstrations, protests, boycotts or recriminations. As Our Lord and Savior has taught us, we answer hate, with love.