



RETAKING THE CULTURE BY REMAKING THE CULTURE

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Hello Men of Christ. I am Peter Kreeft and I teach at Boston College and I have been asked to talk to you about recapturing and remaking the culture.

Well, to recapture something or to remake something assumes that there's a problem that the culture is somehow unmaking itself. And we have lost a culture, that's massively true. So this is a talk about how to deal with that. How to assess it. How to think about it. We philosophers are pretty good about thinking but not that good about acting. Our words are usually, pretty clever, but our actions like to look for words. In other words, our principles are better than our practice—the human race.

If there's something wrong with the culture as there obviously is, let's use the principles that you learn in medical school on how to deal with a sick human body because the culture is a kind of a body, obviously getting sicker and sicker. The four basic principles of a medical analysis are first of all observations of symptoms, secondly, diagnosis of the disease that's causing the symptoms. Thirdly, the prescription for a treatment of the disease. And finally, a prognosis of whether it's going to be cured or not. In other words, the bad effects the bad cause, the good effects the good cause.

Let's go through those four steps. Let's start with the observation of the symptoms. From a religious point of view, our culture is becoming increasingly irreligious. That is Western Civilization, what used to be called Christendom, is exiting at a spectacular rate. For every single person who enters the church, six leave. That's in America. In Europe. It's 10 to 1.

Places that used to have a vibrant Christian culture, most vibrant, the most alive, both in quantity and quality, are now the ones that are the most spectacularly non-Catholic: Germany, Holland, Quebec, Ireland. And the forces that we as Christians oppose are winning vast areas of

battlefield and the opinion of people in our culture is changing radically, 180 degrees, starting with contraception and abortion and then the LGBTQ issues and finally transgenderism, moving in less than one generation from something like an 80 percent disapproval rate to an 80% approval rate. The statistics are spectacular, and they go back to the 20th century. William Bennett, in his Index of Cultural Indicators, noted that in a single generation, no, I think it was a single decade, the teenage suicide rate in America, increased five hundred percent.

So there's obviously something wrong with us and the new movements, the so-called progressives are uniformly in hate rather than in love of our culture, the cancel culture, the 1619 project sponsored by our defining newspaper, The New York Times, explicitly attempts, to turn the story of the founding of our culture totally upside down and relabel, the very essence of America as racism and slavery so that all the moral and religious principles in our Constitution and of our Declaration of Independence and all the virtues of our heroes, Washington, and Adams, and Jefferson, and Lincoln and Martin Luther, King are now seen as aberrations and exceptions, rather than vice versa.

We observe that the heat is turned up, that those on the right and those on the left are farther apart from each other and more passionately farther apart from each other than ever before. We are increasingly apart rather than one and we're not listening to or trying to listen to each other. We're falling apart. The middle ground is the most rare thing in almost all issues.

Literally speaking, that's a pre-staging of death. In Augustine, in his definitively Christian philosophy of politics and history, The City of God, defines a city, civitas in Latin, Community, as persons. United by agreement about the things they love.

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Love defined the city. If you love the same things, then you're friends.

There are more intimate relationships than that. C.S. Lewis, In *The Four Loves*, says the difference between friends and lovers is that lovers want to look at each other and friends stand side by side looking at the same thing and sharing it. That's a very accurate image. So you don't need to love your neighbor, in order to be part of a community, but you do need to agree with your neighbor about your values—what you love. And we're increasingly in disagreement.

In other words, America used to be a city. It no longer is. Society is a body and a body is an organism and any organism, whether it's a vegetable or animal or a human being or a family or a nation, any organism dies when its organs are not connected anymore. Its Soul, its life principle, whatever it is that unifies the organs for the common good, when that dies, It dies. We're dying.

So if we love our culture and we ought to, we want to stop that death. How do we do it? Well, we certainly don't do it by the standard liberal philosophy of autonomy of the absolutization of freedom. Demand that the society be free from any dogmas philosophical or religious, free from any common answer to the most important question of all, namely, what are our values? Why do we exist?

John Rawls is the most famous philosopher, I think, of this liberal denial that culture must have or even could have a substantive philosophy, a world and life view, a common love, prefers that the state be culturally neutral about all values. The problem with that philosophy is that neutral means neutered and what is neutered cannot reproduce? Neutrality is of necessity only when teaching law.

Tradition, which means the handing on of unerring values is as necessary for the survival of a culture or society or a civilization, what Augustine calls a city. That's as necessary as reproduction is for a family to survive. You don't have kids. You're going to die. And today, people are not having kids, are not producing the single most important product that we can possibly produce—children. In other words, tradition is social and cultural reproduction. And the cancel culture is cultural contraception.

People don't have faith in the church. They prefer spirituality to religion. They don't have faith in life itself anymore. How often haven't you heard some people say, "I wouldn't think of bringing children into this awful world. It's irresponsible." What a strange thing to say. Why is it so awful? Is it awful spiritually? Well, we Catholics think so, but the people who say, I wouldn't bring people into this terrible world, aren't usually coming from that point of view. They're not saying the world is terrible because it's not religious enough.

So what do they mean? Well, they mean, it's full of pain. Full of pain. Really? We have less pain right now in the United States of America, in this present time, than any culture in the entire history of the world has ever had. Our technology has conquered nature. Our medical technology has conquered diseases. The amount of pain, the amount of physical pain that the average person expects to have in the next 100 years is about equal to the amount of pain most of our ancestors had in a single year. We have abolished 99% of the pain in our lives.

Our spiritual pain has increased. We need therapy. We need to go to psychiatrists. We need antidepressants, drugs. So what do they mean when they say what a terrible world?

They mean that life itself is terrible. I think the Supreme manifestation of our culture's negative judgment on life itself, is the abortion holocaust in which the givers of life have hired cultures. Preservers of life to destroy it. That's a judgment on life itself. And that's not an accidental disease, like a war which can go over or an economic crisis. It's gonna blow over. Something very Sinister about that.

To not like life itself, to be cynical and skeptical of life itself, that's a very deep disease and hard to diagnose and hard to cure. Much harder than economic or military or surface diseases? So, what's the cause? And what's the diagnosis causing this very strange disease? I think it's no accident that they St. Pope John Paul the second, my candidate for the greatest man in the worst Century in history labeled, our culture, used to be called Christendom, now is simply the western civilization and which is increasingly meriting the title of Apostate Christendom. He labeled it. He called it a culture of death.

That's what exorcists do to demons. They demand that the demon speak its name, its identity, We're a culture of death. The ultimate philosophy of Hell, the ultimate goal and purpose and strategy of our deepest. Spiritual enemies is I think best expressed

In Karl Marx's favorite quotation from Goethe's Faust. These words come from the devil: "Everything that exists deserves to perish." Physically. Emotionally. Spiritually, Existence itself. Life itself.

Now, people wouldn't usually formulate it that way. Marx had the best to do that. Deep down, that's what's going on. In other words, our enemies are not just flesh and blood. Our own divinely-revealed Scriptures tell us that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, we wrestle against principalities and powers of wickedness in high places.

So, this is not just a culture war, it's a spiritual war. Of course, that's not new. Been going on ever since that little incident with a snake and an apple in a garden. But it certainly heated up and the culture is no longer on our side. It's on the other side recently turning. In other words, the diagnosis according to scripture is that the death that we see in our culture is a result of sin. Paul says, in Romans, 6:23, the wages of sin is death. The gift of God is life in Christ. Right, sin causes death. God causes life. That diagnosis tells us how serious this war is.

The manifestations of this diagnosis, the specific sins, the specific evils, the specific diseases that we have are manifold and I think they all come down to one in terms of God's law as revealed in scripture. There's ten commandments. And the first one is the greatest and most important. That's why it comes first. It forbids idolatry. It's a question of, who's your god? Like who's your daddy? What do you worship? What do you love the most. One of the dangers that a talk like this can have is that you take the title too seriously. Retaking the culture. That's our end. That's our goal. Civilization itself is our God. It's an idol. The first thing we have to do is throw away the idols. And culture is an Idol. The culture is not going to last forever. Oh God. You won't find the United States of America in heaven. Sorry. It's a wonderful country and I'm privileged to live here, and I wouldn't exchange for any other, but it's not heaven.

The gates of hell will not prevail against the church. We are not the church. That is qua American or even qua Western Civilization. Not God, all false gods infallibly fail.

And when we put a second thing first, like that, we idolize it, we not only miss the first thing, we spoil the second to take on the day. Obviously addiction to drugs is truly harmful. And pornography, addiction to sex is harmful and addiction to anything—shopping, paperclip—because it destroys the very thing that is meant to enjoy. The alcoholic can't appreciate alcohol and can the culture junkie really appreciate culture?. Culture, however, is terribly important because it helps us in one direction or another. And it's helping us in the wrong direction. Dorothy Day, who is sort of the American Mother Teresa, defines a good society in the simplest and best way I've ever heard. She says a good society, simply is a society that makes it easy for you to be good. With that standard, we're not living in a good society. We're living in a society that makes it very easy to be bad.

So society is important, but it's not the most important thing. Souls are infinitely more important than societies, civilizations or cultures. Every civilization that has ever existed, every one that now exists and every one that will exist, whether it's small or great, whether it's wise or foolish, whether it's good or bad is destined to become dust, never to rise again. But every single soul that has ever lived is destined to live forever, either in unimaginable joy or in unimaginable misery. That's what we're fighting about. Culture is important because it influences souls. We noticed that people have become more passionate about politics and less passionate about their religion. They've politicized religion and religionized politics.

And that's almost to be expected because that's what idolatry does—simply shifts. our allegiance away from God to something else. We cool our devotion to God. We transfer the heat elsewhere. As in physics, energy doesn't just disappear. It just transforms itself. The universe doesn't lose energy, only transfer and I don't think we can lose the religious heat. That is at the heart of our heart.

We can only transfer to false gods.. Sometimes that is the false god of coolness and tolerance. It's a strange, but observable, fact that those who are intolerant of nothing but intolerance are at least as intolerant as those people whom they deem to be intolerant. Those who say they hate only hate speech often classify as hate speech everything they hate, which includes much of the whole additional value system of western civilization.

The devil is very pleased to get us to worship any idol at all. He doesn't give a damn, literally, whether we're worshiping the donkey or the elephant, as long as we're not worshiping the lamb. Well, that diagnosis almost automatically gives us our prescription. And that's nothing new, Nothing terribly creative. The only way to save societies is to become saints. Holiness! Which is very simple. It's willing the will of God with all your heart and mind and soul. And to do that from inside out, beginning with individuals, and then in families and then in Christian communities, and then the whole society. It won't work from the outside in. But the society can influence communities and influence families. We can influence individuals very powerful yet, the family is made of individuals, communities are made of families, nations are made up of communities.

That's the basic point of Rod. Dreher's book, The Benedict Option, almost universally misunderstood as something that it isn't. It isn't a call to withdraw from cultural involvement, just the opposite. But it's an invitation to start where we have to start with our own concrete communities, especially families. Same thing, save the world. Yes, but they do it by starting with themselves and their families and their communities and radiating outwards. Not vice versa. And they do it for God. Not for the culture. They are not culture junkies. They're not idols. But you want to become a saint to save your culture, you've got things upside down. Save your culture because culture helps you be good. So the prescription is very simple and very obvious and nothing terribly new. We know the two great commandments: love God with your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. So we better get on with them.

The prescription is very traditional. We find it in the words of Cardinal Ratzinger before he became pope, gave us these words which I think are both our prescription and our prognosis. He wrote the

future of the church issue from those whose roots are deep and who live from the fullness of their faith. It will not issue from those who accommodate themselves to, the passing moment. Nor will it issue from those who take the easy road, who sidestepped the passion of faith, who declare false and obsolete interests and legalistic all that makes demands on them, harms them and hurts them and compels them to sacrifice themselves. To put this more positively, the future of the church as always will be reshaped by saints.. So please become one.

He also wrote, when the trial of this sifting is past. He wrote this in 1969, a true prophet. When the trial of this sifting is past, and we're in a sifting. The little grains of sand are going through the holes and only the big ones are staying. When the trial of this sifting is past and it will be past. Everything passes. A great power will flow from a more spiritualized simplified Church. Men in a totally planned world. The secular world, the totalitarian world, will find themselves unspeakably lonely.

Isn't it astonishing that social media, which is supposed to be a wonderful instrument to bring people together, foster communication and community has done exactly the opposite. It has made us intolerably, lonely. We're disappearing into our screen. Because we're addicted to them. One of the optional essays, I give to some of my students in my philosophy class at Boston College is writing a personal essay on how your world changed when you resolved not to look at any screen for 24 hours. No smart phone, no computer no TV. So far about half of the people who wrote essays on that subject confess that they couldn't do it. They discovered they were addicts. I cannot live without my screen. That's my identity. Now that's not your identity. That's your idol. Doesn't matter what your identity is. If it's anything but God send it back.

Cardinal Ratzinger went on "In a totally planned world men will find themselves unspeakably lonely. Then they will discover the little flock of believers as something wholly new."

That's what happened in the early church. The hard-nosed spectacularly successful Romans had these questions. They said that's something new. We never saw that before. What kind of love is that? They're willingly going to go to the lions in the Colosseum and they're singing hymns and forgiving

their enemies as lions are eating them. And they're helping comes the plague. Don't they realize they can get the plague? No, we never saw anything like that before. The world will sit up and take notice. What, converted the world was not philosophers and theologians. Although we need those, too. What converted the world was Saints. So, is it going to happen again? Yes, inevitably, but it may take a long, long time.

My prognosis, my last point, is a level one. Well, I don't see much optimism on the horizon short-term. We seem to be in a tsunami which is increasing. The younger you are the less religious you are in almost every place in western civilization. So we're being flooded, a new Dark Age is upon us, but we emerged from the Dark Age. And we will emerge from this. Our long-range prognosis is infallibly hopeful. Hope is more than optimism. Optimism is just a feeling or a thought. Hope is a guarantee.

Good has to triumph over evil. It's stronger. Light always triumphs over darkness. Bring even a little light like a match into a big darkness, like an enormous room, and no matter how much darkness there is, it's not going to put out the light. It may take time for the light to multiply but that's what light does. That's what life, that's what love, three things God is. So, we can fight this war even though we seem to be losing confident that in the end we win because it's not just us who is fighting, it's God fighting. We're instruments.

We're just pencils held in his hand. But what our strategy should be, how we should fight, how long it will take, what the new civilization of love, that will emerge in the end after much suffering, will look like, we don't know. We don't know a lot of the things we would like to know. And God knows what we need to know. And he tells us what we need to know, not what we want to know, which is why life is all a mystery.

But if we only keep in mind, that central thing we're ok and that central thing, summarized very nicely by the Saints and my favorite Saint in modern times is Mother Teresa. She's so incredibly simple. She never lost an argument. She used words of one syllable. One of my favorite stories is Malcolm Muggeridge, who was a brilliant British journalist for one of the world's funniest Humor Magazine "Punch", was an atheist or at least an agnostic for most of his life and then he became a Christian in his old age, but not a Catholic. And then he made Mother Teresa famous and became her close friend and they were walking together one day and Mother Teresa said, "Malcolm, you're a good man. Why don't you see your way all the way to cross the Tiber and to become a Catholic?" And Malcolm said, well, Mother I'll answer you in your own words. I guess God looks down here at the two of us and says, well, here's a Catholic and an Anglican and they're both good people and Malcolm's a good man, and I need some good men outside my church as well as inside.

Mother Teresa answered him, with three words that Malcolm said, "I couldn't refuse and why I became a Catholic. The words were 'no he doesn't.' "You can't refute Mother Teresa. She puts everything into a little saying, and my favorite saying of all Mothers Teresa's, especially when I'm down. "God did not put me into this world to be successful, he put me into this world to be faithful. So, just be faithful." Just sow the seeds. Thank you. It was a privilege to talk to you.