

UNIVERSITY CLUB REMARKS

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Our theme for this morning is “faith in the family.” That’s good news because I want to talk about sex. Sex plays a big role in a couple of the chapters of the book I just published. And even more conveniently, it’s the one word – except for maybe the word “food” – that can keep the attention of a male audience this early in the day.

Before I go in that direction though, I want to offer just a couple of preliminary thoughts.

Here’s the first thought. We men – all of us, both lay and clergy -- bear a special responsibility because the Word of God tasks us as leaders. That doesn’t make us better than anyone else. And it takes nothing away from the equality of women and men. But it does place a special duty on our shoulders to lead. The great saint of the early Eastern Church, John Chrysostom, described every human father as the bishop of his family. All of you fathers here today are bishops. And every father shapes the soul of the next generation with his love, or the lack of it.

In the end, renewal of the Church in our age is the work of God. But he works through us. The privilege and the challenge of that work belong to us. So we need to ask ourselves: What do I want my life to mean? If I claim to be a believing Catholic man, can I prove it with the patterns of my life? When do I pray? How often do I seek out the Sacrament of Penance? What am I doing for the poor? How am I serving the needy? Do I really know Jesus Christ? Who am I leading to the Church? How many young people have I asked to consider a vocation? How much time do I spend sharing with others about God -- with my wife, my children and my friends? How well and how often do I listen for God’s will in my own life?

The Church has lots of good reasons why people should believe in God, believe in Jesus Christ, and believe in the beauty and urgency of her own mission. But she has only one *irrefutable* argument for the truth of what she teaches: the personal example of her saints.

The world needs faithful Catholic men; men with the hunger to be saints. The role of a Catholic husband and father -- a man who sacrifices his own desires, out of love, to serve the needs of his wife and children – is vital to the flourishing of a Christian home. The Church in the United States may face a very hard road in the next 20 years, and her sons need to step up and lead by the witness of their daily lives.

We can waste a lot of our lives as men on worries and distractions that lead us away from real happiness. We need Jesus Christ, and we need the friendship of real brothers in the Lord, to be the disciples and leaders God intends us to be. And there’s no better place to pursue that friendship and renew our vocations as Christian men than here, in the time we spend together at moments like this.

Here’s my second thought. Christians are a people of hope, and we men need to model it. Pope

Francis warns us – I think very wisely – that we need to embody the joy of the Gospel and live in a way that draws others to Jesus Christ with a spirit of energy and freedom.

That’s why pessimism is such a dangerous thing. It can easily poison entire lives. But being a realist is not the same as being a pessimist. Optimism and pessimism are two sides of the same coin. Each can be very misleading because both God and the devil are full of surprises. The virtue of hope is a trust in the future based on our faith in a loving God; a God who loves us *personally and unrepeatably* as a Father loves his sons. And that love endures forever, even when our lives and the world around us seem to be in turmoil.

Hope is not optimism. There’s a line in the King James Version of the Book of Job, where Job -- even in the depths of his worst suffering – says this about God: “*Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.*” That’s the virtue of hope.

There’s an immense amount of beauty and good in the world. There’s a deep well of goodness in our own country. We should take pride in that, and never ignore or underestimate it. The future is never predictable or predetermined, except in the very long framework of God’s design. Humans are creatures of intellect and free will. *We* make the future, because as Augustine said, *we* are the times. And that’s why our lives as Christian men really *matter* – not just now, and not just for ourselves, but forever and in the way we influence every person we meet.

So having said all that, let’s get back to sex. And I’m sorry if some of this information is a little data-heavy, but there’s a reason, and we’ll get to it.

Here’s a simple fact: Up to 30 percent of all data transferred on the internet is pornography-related. Globally the porn business generates about \$100 billion in revenue every year, with about \$13 billion of that in the United States. OK, so porn is bad. That’s not news. Everybody in this room already knows it. But that doesn’t stop it from being the most common and destructive addiction many priests now hear in confession – not just from men, but now also from women. And it’s a huge epidemic among clergy and married men because it’s so easy to hide and access in private.

As psychiatrists like Norman Doidge have shown, pornography literally remaps the brain. As the appetite for porn grows, the *nature* of the desired porn changes. This is why so much pornography has shifted in recent decades from romantic eroticism to more violent and humiliating sadomasochism. But porn also hurts much more than just the user. It alienates spouses. It destroys real sexual intimacy. It reduces people to objects. And those are just the immediate human costs. The social impact is much wider and more damaging. It’s a major factor in divorce, infidelity, and broken families. And even more brutally, the porn industry also fuels and feeds on the exploitation of women and minors forced into “sex work.”

Now there’s a paradox here, and it’s worth talking about. As I’ve said elsewhere, America is the child of a kind of “mixed marriage” between biblical faith and Enlightenment deism. The Christian roots of the country go back a long way, and they’re Protestant; but not just any kind of Protestant. They’re Puritan Calvinist -- and the Puritans were not exactly known for their freewheeling attitudes toward sex. Or anything else.

Three hundred years later, this has made for some curious results. Americans today are much more religious than Europeans. That's a fact. And Americans who actively practice their faith have much higher rates of marriage and family satisfaction and stability than the norm. That's also a fact. The data show that even "theological conservatism" -- however that's defined -- seems to strengthen marriages. So a lot of Americans of my generation grew up assuming that Europeans -- and especially the French -- we're much more libertine than us. On *our* side of the Atlantic we're practical, self-disciplined and sane. Europeans on the other hand are sensual, decadent and off the rails.

Or that's how the thinking went, and in some ways still goes.

So here's the paradox. More than a million people took to the streets in 2012 to protest gay marriage. But that happened in Paris, not Washington. Americans marry more but also divorce more than do people in almost any European nation. Americans also experience single parenthood and re-partnering more frequently. In the United States, 10 percent of women will have had three husbands or live-in partners by the age of 35. In France, the number is fewer than 2 percent.

Americans marry and cohabit at a younger age than in Europe. And their relationships are much more tenuous. More than half of cohabiting American couples will break up within five years, a much higher rate than in Europe. And one-fifth of all Americans who marry will divorce or separate in the same five-year time frame. That's more than double the number in Europe. Children in the United States live through more parental breakups, and they have more new adults moving in with the biological parent who cares for them, than children in any Western European country. As a result, American family life involves more upheavals and transitions than anywhere in Western Europe, with negative impact on the young.

All of these data, by the way, come from the distinguished Johns Hopkins social researcher, Andrew Cherlin.

Here's the point. American religion, shaped by the Reformation and its aftermath, has a communitarian surface, but it also has a strongly individualist undercurrent. As Cherlin notes, this can actually *encourage and accelerate* marriage breakup rather than slowing it down.

That seems implausible but it makes perfect sense. And here's why.

Prior to the mid-19th century, romance had little to do with the choice of a marital partner. Arranged marriages among the elite were common. For everyone else, reality set the demands. In agrarian societies like the early United States, farming needed two dependable workers, a husband and wife. It also needed children to help with the labor and pass along ownership. In the cities, families needed a reliable mother in the home to raise the children and a reliable father in the work force to earn what the family required. Sexual attraction and emotional fulfillment obviously were factors. They always have been. But for the serious work of marriage and family, they weren't the main ingredients.

The movement of work from the home to the factory during the industrial revolution cut the need for large families. Schooling young people to be economically competitive became more costly. Parents had fewer children. As a result, throughout the 20th century, marriage shifted to a more “companionate” and individualized model. Romance, sexual satisfaction, and personal fulfillment took on more importance.

American religion, with its individualist focus, actually fueled the shift from marriage as an objective institution that serves the common good, to a subjective relationship that pleases and rewards each of the partners. And this intensified a basic tension in the American character: a hunger for the moral ideal of marriage versus a right to pursue our individual happiness *right now*.

Again, here’s the point: Today’s pressure for sexual liberation didn’t happen in a vacuum. It fits comfortably with trends in American culture that go back many decades, even before the 1960s. As evidence, it’s worth reading Wilhelm Reich’s book from 1936, *The Sexual Revolution*. Reich, an Austrian psychoanalyst, argued that a really fundamental revolution in human affairs can *never* be merely political or economic. It can *only* be made at the level of sexual freedom. And it needs to begin by wiping away institutions like marriage, family, and traditional sexual morality.

What’s interesting about Reich’s work is that, *80 years ago*, he saw the United States as the most promising place for that kind of revolution to happen, despite its rigorous Puritan history. And again, the reason is simple. Americans have a deep streak of individualism, a distrust of authority, and a big appetite for self-invention. As religion loses its hold on people’s behavior, all of these instincts accelerate. The trouble is that the sexual revolution is not just about personal sexual morality or the social health of American family life -- though it obviously impacts both. Rather, as the philosopher Michael Hanby argues, “the sexual revolution is, at bottom, the *technological* revolution and its perpetual war against natural limits applied externally to the body, and internally to our self-understanding.”

Think of it this way. Just as modern feminism depends on the technological conquest of the female body -- the suppression of fertility -- so, too, Hanby argues, same-sex marriage depends on the technological mastery of procreation. Things like surrogacy and artificial reproductive technologies can now give same-sex couples the offspring to reinforce their claims of equality with natural marriage. And if the state recognizes the *legal* equality of same-sex and natural marriages, then *denying* the traditional financial and political privileges of marriage to same-sex unions is clearly a form of bigotry.

Once the genie is out of the bottle, sexual freedom goes in directions and takes on shapes that nobody imagined. And ultimately it leads to questions about who a “person” is and what it means to be human.

All of which underscores a simple fact: The surest way to transform a culture is from the inside out. And the surest path to doing it isn’t through reasoned debate, which is too tedious, or violence, which is too costly, but by colonizing and reshaping the culture’s appetites and behaviors – starting with sex.

I'll close now with just a couple of final comments, and then we can exchange some thoughts during questions. Here's the dilemma of our current American Catholic life.

The Church in the United States has a huge infrastructure of aging brick and mortar. It was built in a different age, for different needs. We no longer have the resources to maintain it even if that were pastorally wise – which too often, it's not. The realities we'll face as a Church in the next 20 years will be very different from, and much more challenging than, anything in our past. And I think we often lack the courage and ingenuity to deal with it.

So what's the answer? Well, please buy and read my book so the publisher doesn't get angry with me. But I can offer a few simple facts.

The reason today's new communities, charisms and movements in the Church are so popular -- and at their best, so successful -- is simple. It's the same reason saints like Dominic and Francis renewed the Christian Church in their own medieval time. They put flesh on the meaning of the Gospel with the witness of their lives. Today's new movements provide a reason to believe, the personal and family friendships to sustain that belief, and the ongoing direction and support needed for real Christian missionary zeal. And *that's* decisive, because American culture, for all its great virtues and advantages, isolates each one of us in our individual appetites and anxieties. It fills our material needs while it too often starves the soul.

When you write a book, you can go on and on, for pages and chapters, about what we need to do to change the world. But in the end it's very simple; simple but also very hard. Plans, programs, policies and committees: All these things have their place in the life of the Church and in her renewal for the future. But the heart of the matter in every life, in every age, never changes. It's whether we're willing to unplug from the world's seductions and distractions, and *actually live* the Beatitudes, or at least to *try*, instead of just talking about them as beautiful ideals.

In the end, that's the real and most important challenge in being a Christian man: Living what we claim to believe. So I'll pray for each one of you this week, that God gives you the grace to be the man your wife and family, and your colleagues, need.

And please don't forget this man in your own prayers, because I need them.