

# **Eight Modern Errors Every Catholic Should Know and Avoid**

**Consider this eightfold list of modern errors that are common even in the Church.**

by Msgr. Charles Pope

There are many errors in our time that masquerade as wisdom and balance, but they are no such thing. I have written before on many errors of our time of a more philosophical nature. The following list that I compile is more phenomenological than philosophical. To say that something is phenomenological is to indicate that it is more descriptive of the thing as experienced, than of the exact philosophical or scientific manner of categorizing it. For example, to say the sun rises and sets is to describe the phenomenon, or what we see and experience. The sun does not actually rise and set. Rather, the earth turns in relation to the sun which remains fixed. But we use the phenomenon (what we experience) to communicate the reality, rather than the more scientific words like apogee, perigee, nadir and periapsis.

And thus in the list that follows I propose certain fundamental errors of our time that are common, but I use language that speaks less to philosophies and logical fallacies, and more to the errors as experienced. Further, though the errors are common in the world, I present them here as especially problematic because we all too often find them in the Church as well. They are sadly and commonly expressed by Catholics and represent a kind of infection that has set in which reflects worldly and secular thinking, not Godly and spiritual thinking. These are only eight. I am just getting started. I hope you will add to the list and define carefully what you identify. But for now, consider this eightfold list of modern errors that are common even in the Church.

1. Mercy without reference to repentance – For too many today, “mercy” has come to mean, “God is fine with what I am doing.” But true mercy does not overlook sin, it presupposes it, sees it as a serious problem, and offers a way out of sin. God’s mercy is his way of extending a hand to draw us out of the mire of sin. And this is why repentance is the key that unlocks mercy. For, it is by repentance that we reach for and grasp God’s merciful and outstretched hand.

One of the chief errors today is the proclamation of mercy without reference to repentance. Sadly, this is common, even in the Church. It is far too common to hear sermons on mercy with no reference to repentance. The opening words of Jesus’ ministry were “Repent and believe the Gospel!” The order is important. For how can we experience the good news of God’s mercy if we do not first repent, come to a new mind and know our need for that mercy. If you don’t know the bad news, the good news is no news. Repentance brings us to our senses, makes us accept our need for change, seeks God and unlocks his mercy. This error of mercy without reference to repentance is widespread in the Church today and leads to the sin of presumption, a sin against hope.

2. Staurophobia – The term staurophobia comes from Greek roots and refers to a fear of the Cross (stauros = cross + phobia = fear). Within the Church this error emerges from reticence by Catholics to frankly discuss the demands of discipleship. It reveals a strong hesitation to insist that even hard things are often the best, the proper thing to do. Many Catholics, including priests and bishops, are downright fearful when pointing to the demands of the cross. When the world protests and says, “Are you saying that those with same-sex attraction cannot get married or be sexually intimate but must live a kind of celibacy?!” The honest answer is, “Yes, that is what we are saying.” But since that answer is hard and rooted in the Cross, many Catholics are dreadfully afraid of a straight-forward, honest answer. The same is true for other difficult moral situations such as Euthanasia (in spite of suffering, we are still not free to take our life or that of another), abortion (despite difficulties and even in cases of rape and incest we are still not free to kill a child in the womb), and divorce and remarriage (in spite of unfortunate developments in a marriage, this does not mean that one is free to leave one marriage to enter another).

Staurophobia also makes many hesitant to issue correction within the Church and in families. There is almost a cringing fear of insisting on any demands or requirements or of even issuing the mildest of punishments or corrective measures. Things like this might upset people and that is one of the worst outcomes for a staurophobic

who fears any sort of suffering, for themselves or others. They fail to see a redemptive quality in insisting on the demands of the cross.

St. Paul says, But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Gal 6:14). But for too many Catholics today, the cross and its demands makes them cringe and even feel embarrassment. Instead of boasting in the power of the Cross, the thinking seems more to be "How dare we, or the Church point to it, and actually insist that it is better than the comfort of false compassion."

St. Paul understood that Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But he goes on to say, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (see 1 Cor 1:23-24). But try to tell this to a staurophobic, and sadly they are legion in the Church.

3. Universalism – Universalism is the belief that most, if not all people are going to be saved in the end. This is directly contrary to our Lord's own words wherein he sadly attests that "many" are on the road that leads to destruction and "few" are on the narrow and difficult road that leads to salvation (See Matthew 7:14, Luke 13:23-30). Dozens of parables and other warnings also come from our Lord in this regard and the straight-forward teaching of the Lord makes it clear that we must soberly accept that many, and not a few are going to be lost unless we, by God's grace urgently summon them to Christ and to authentic discipleship.

I have written extensively on this elsewhere and do not intend to rewrite all that now. But universalism is a serious discrepancy that is widely held today. Countless Catholics seldom if ever hear sermons that warn of judgment or the possibility of hell. Neither do they mention it to others or even consider it as an actual possibility. Given the pervasiveness of universalism there is very little urgency among Catholics to evangelize or even live the faith themselves. This attitude has to go if there is going to be any serious reform in the Church or evangelical zeal.

4. Deformed Dialogue – The term "dialogue" has come to mean an almost endless conversation. As such it lacks a clear goal to convince the other. It usually just means "talk." In our culture merely talking is given a lot of credit. While talking is not bad per se, it can substitute mere action for a true goal. Originally "dialogue" had a more vigorous meaning. It comes from the Greek and is used in Scripture. διαλέγομαι (dialégomai) where we get the word "dialogue" comes from the Greek roots diá, (through, from one side across to the other) + légō, ("speaking to a conclusion"). Dia intensifies lego so it is properly, "getting a conclusion across" by exchanging thoughts, words or reasons.

And thus we see "dialogue" was originally a far more vigorous word than it would seem most people mean by the word today. In the New Testament it is used more often in the context of giving testimony and of trying to convince others the Gospel (e.g. Acts 17:2, 17 and 18:4). But, as noted, in our times dialogue can actually stall conversion and given the impression that all sides have valid stances and that merely "understanding" the position of the other is praise-worthy. Understanding may have value, but mostly is of value to lay a foundation for conversion to the truth of the Gospel.

It is unclear today that conversion is actually a goal when many Catholics speak of dialogue with the world or with unbelievers. Dialogue is a tool, not a goal, it is a method, not a destination. And as a method, dialogue (in its original meaning) is a vigorous, dynamic and joyful setting forth of the Gospel, not a chatty and (seemingly) endless conversation. It is true, we seek to win souls, not arguments. But winning the soul is a true goal that many modern references to "dialogue" and "understanding" seem to lack. Hence "deformed dialogue" makes our compendium of modern problems and errors.

5. Equating Love with Kindness – Kindness is an aspect of love. But so is rebuke; so is punishment; as is praise. Yet today many, even in the Church, think of love only as kindness, affirmation, approval, encouragement, and other positive attributes. But true love is, at times, willing to punish, to insist on change, and to rebuke error. Yet the modern age, equating love with mere kindness says, "If you really love me you will affirm, even celebrate, what I do." In this sort of climate, when Church teaching does not conform with modern notions of sexuality, for example, the Church is accused of "hate" simply because we do not "affirm" what people demand we affirm. Identity politics (where people hinge their whole identity and dignity on a narrow range of behaviors or attributes) intensifies the perception of a personal affront.

But instead of standing our ground and insisting that setting love and truth in opposition is a false dichotomy, most Catholics cave and many also come to believe that love can be reduced to mere kindness. Many of them take up the view of the world that the Church is unkind and therefore mean or even hateful. Never mind that Jesus said things that were, by this standard, unkind, and that he often spoke quite frankly about sin (beyond mere social justice and pharisaical attitudes to include things such as sexual sin, adultery, divorce, unbelief and so forth). No, forget all that, because God is love, and love is kindness and kindness is always pleasant and affirming. Therefore they conclude that Jesus couldn't really have said many of the things attributed to him. This error reduces Jesus to a harmless hippie and misconstrues love by equating it with mere kindness and unconditional affirmation. Many Catholics have succumbed to this error and sacrificed the truth. It has a high place in our compendium of modern errors.

6. Misconstruing the nature of tolerance – Most people today equate tolerance with approval. Therefore, when many demand or ask for “tolerance” what they really demand is approval. But tolerance is from the Latin *tolerare*: to put up with, countenance, or suffer. As such it refers to the conditional endurance of, or at least non-interference with beliefs, actions, or practices that one considers to be wrong. One might tolerate them to some degree to prevent, for example, severe enforcements or draconian penalties, unnecessary intrusion into privacy, etc. But if the objection component is missing, we are not speaking of “toleration” but of “indifference” or “affirmation.”

And here, precisely, lies the heart of the error for Catholics who embrace the toleration- as-approval error. Simply put, what they are calling tolerance and even congratulating themselves for, is actually a form of indifferentism and subjectivism. It does not properly reverence God's moral vision. Instead of joyfully and zealously announcing the truth as revealed by God, many adopt a false tolerance that is indifferent to truth or even affirms error. And then, to top it off they congratulate themselves for the “moral superiority” of their tolerance. In fact, it is more likely sloth that is at work. Sloth in this case is an aversion to undertake the arduous task of speaking the truth to a doubting scoffing world.

Tolerance is an important virtue in complex and pluralistic cultures, but it ought not be so expanded that it loses its actual meaning or be so absolutized that tolerance is expected at all times, simply because it is demanded. Catholics also need to sober up a bit and realize that when many today demand tolerance from us, they have no intention of extending it to us. Many of the same interest groups that demand tolerance are working to erode religious liberty and are increasingly unwilling to tolerate religious views in the public square. Our consistent caving to demands for false tolerance have only help to usher in a great darkness and pressure to conform to or approve of serious sin.

7. Anthropocentrism – This term refers to the modern tendency to have man at the center and not God. It has been a long tendency in the world ever since the Renaissance. Sadly, though it has deeply infected the Church in recent decades. This is especially evident in the Liturgy, not intrinsically, but as practically and widely celebrated. Our architecture, songs and gestures, incessant announcements, and congratulatory rituals are self-referential and inwardly focused. The liturgy, as commonly celebrated seems more about us than God. Even the Eucharistic prayer which is directed entirely to God is usually celebrated facing the people.

It is never good, especially in the Church, to consign God to the margins. This marginalization of God is evident not only in the liturgy, but in parish life which is often top-heavy with activism rooted in the corporal works of mercy, but little attention to the spiritual works of mercy. Social organizations predominate, but it is hard to find interest in Bible Study, traditional novenas and other spiritual works devoted to God.

Announcing God through vigorous evangelization work is also rare and the parish seems more a clubhouse than a lighthouse. Human beings are important, Christian humanism is a virtue, but anthropocentrism is a common modern error rooted in excess. The worship of God and the spread of his kingdom is too little in evidence in many parishes. Parents too seem more focused on the temporal wellbeing of children, on their academic standing and so forth, but less concerned overall with the spiritual knowledge or wellbeing of them. God must be central if man is to be truly elevated.

8. Role reversal – Jesus said that the Holy Spirit whom he would send to us would convict the world (see John 16:8). And thus, the proper relationship of a Catholic to the world is to have the world on trial. St. Paul says, Test all things. Hold fast to what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thess 5:21-22). So, again, the world is to be on trial based on the light of the Gospel.

But too often Catholics have things reversed and put the Word of God and the teachings of the Church on trial, judging them by the perspective of the world. We should judge all things by the light of God. And yet it is common to hear Catholics scoff at teachings that challenge worldly thinking or offend against worldly priorities. Many Catholics have tucked their faith under their political views, worldviews, preferences and thoughts. If the faith conflicts with any of these worldly categories, guess which usually gives way.

Jesus says, If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels. (Mk 8:38). But many are ashamed of the Lord's teachings that do not conform to worldly and popular notions.

All of this amounts to a tragic role reversal wherein the world and its notions overrule the gospel. It should be the world that is convicted by the Holy Spirit. Instead we put very God himself in the role of defendant. It should not be so. Do not be deceived: God will not be mocked. Whatever a man sows, he will reap in return. The one who sows to please his flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; but the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life (Gal 6:7-8).

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