

A Convivial Culture

—Ray Pennings—

The second issue of Cardus's newest publication enterprise, *Convivium*, is off the press and Father de Souza's "Sea to Sea" column includes an account of a conversation he had with the late Father Richard John Neuhaus in 2008 regarding this project. De Souza tells us how Neuhaus not only encouraged this magazine project but also inspired its name.

Convivium might just have been Father Richard's favourite word. There are other candidates—*winsome* and *egregious* come to mind—but he loved that word, *convivium*. He was the only one I knew who used it in ordinary conversation but, of course, his conversations were rarely ordinary. "*Convivium*" strictly means "to live together," but it connotes a banquet or feast, indicating that a certain supply of rich food and fine wine are, if not required, at least desired.

The passage came to mind as over the past few days, I received an unusual flurry of emails regarding a column I had published in the *Calgary Herald* over the weekend. It was a satirical piece on the abortion debate in Canada and while some readers seemed to like it, a few expressed disappointment that I had used the satirical genre. To cite one, "All your points are good ones, but I think in the long run it is self-defeating, given Cardus' goals, to use sarcasm. While it was well done, you characterized the article as satire, but I perceived it as sarcasm, and sarcasm is a negative and extremely harmful manner of critiquing any point of view."

While I am not so post-modern in my perspective as to assert that readers are always right and the text says whatever they think it says, I accept the premise that sarcasm rarely advances one's cause. But let's, at least for the sake of argument, accept the column as the satire I intended. Would that have a place in a convivial debate, or does being winsome mean forswearing this genre?

Sometimes an unconventional way of making an argument is the only way of receiving a hearing. My guess is that when it comes to the abortion debate in Canada, there is very little meaningful dialogue taking place anywhere on the subject. In this context—in which those who have concerns about abortion had been very publicly told that the debate is over, that the public lacks interest in even giving counter-arguments a hearing—a conventional intervention would have been ignored. So I tried my hand at satire and found a newspaper willing to publish it. My hope was that by framing my case as a conversion story and apology, I might get a hearing from some who otherwise would have ignored the piece.

Whether it achieved its objective is hard to measure although it did prompt more feedback, public and private, than most pieces I write. And just like a zinger at the supper table that makes a point, I don't think the occasional article of this sort negates Cardus' credibility as an organization dedicated to convivial conversation in the public square. To be sure, a steady diet of anything would get tiring and it remains true that the convivial social dinner table requires a respectful tone, appropriate sharing, and social grace. But it also requires honesty. And sometimes a bit of satirical wit, like a strong spice in an appropriate portion, contributes to the zest of the meal and perhaps even provides a bit of a bite that makes the meal more memorable.

Sick Schools, Sick Students, Sick State

—Brian Dijkema—

There is an illness plaguing our public school systems. And like a runny nose in a kindergarten class, it spreads quickly. When public schools become sick, it's usually not too long before the whole nation becomes sick. The whole sad debacle unfolding in Nova Scotia is like a giant sneeze in the kindergarten song circle.

Let's start with the superintendent, Ms. Nancy Pynch-Worthylake, and the school board. Young William Swinimer wore a bright yellow t-shirt emblazoned with the words "Life is Wasted without Jesus" to school. Those words offended another student, who complained to the vice-principal, who asked William to remove the shirt. The *National Post* reports that the vice-principal considers the words on the shirt "hate-talk." There is more to the story, of course: the boy says that he had been "bullied" about his faith prior to this incident; the school maintains that he was suspended not only because of the shirt, but because of his defiance of the principal's order; and the school says it is "expected that students will not wear clothing with messages that may offend others' beliefs, race, religion, culture or lifestyle."

Now, let's get one thing straight: the board's decision and its reasons for doing so are inane, thin-skinned, and not becoming of a liberal society. Judging from the board's later reversing of its decision, after it consulted "human rights experts" (a process which should make us all shudder), it was also probably legally wrong. But more importantly, it undermines the purpose of the school. If the purpose of education in a liberal society is to teach future students to uphold democracy (a purpose which is often given as a rationale in defence of a state monopoly on schooling, though this is itself debatable), then surely it should be a place where offensive ideas do not equal suspension. The student wasn't threatening anyone. Even if his shirt did "judge" someone's life, I'm certain that it was considerably lower pressure judgment than most rendered in the halls of a public high school, for grounds other than religion. Anyone who's been in a grade 10 change room before gym class can hear at least 34 significantly more offensive things than "Life is wasted without Jesus."

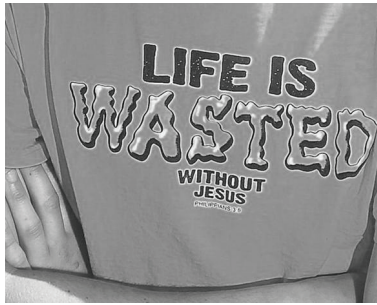
Time to Think

—Robert Joustra—

In *Time's* latest issue, Graham Allison chronicles the timing and decisions leading up to the raid and killing of Osama bin Laden. "How it Went Down" is a pop analysis by a rock star foreign policy analyst, one who cut his teeth and made his fame on the Cuban missile crisis, and its many—many—idiosyncratic, occasionally terrifying, revelations of the decision-making matrix in the halls of power.

"How it Went Down" tells a different story, maybe even an encouraging one, about how large scale bureaucracies and enormously powerful personalities and institutions can collaborate to produce precise, calculated results. These are not the adjectives that jump to mind for the American government, but Allison's piece is a touchstone for those who believe, rightly it turns out, that provided enough motivation modern governments can function *swiftly*, *defly*, and *intelligently* in a modern media environment.

The killing of Osama bin Laden did violate national sovereignty, severely compromise Pakistani and American relations—on both sides—



William Swinimer's t-shirt

The proper response from the superintendent would have been to hear the complaint and have the offended student talk to William about why he was wearing the shirt, what it meant, and whether or not it was in keeping with Christianity—and if so, why. That would have been a smart pedagogical move, and might have even led to mutual enlightenment, and maybe even a bit of respect between the parties. But no, our schools no longer consider eternal questions—or any questions which might lead to serious debate—worth talking about. Schools now prefer to manage conflict, or rather avoid anything that has even the slightest whiff of conflict about it. It's telling that Ms. Pynch-Worthylake dwells on "the easy way to deal with this" rather than the right way, or the best way, for the children. Such is the sorry state of education in our late liberal society.

Williams Swinimer is absolutely justified when he says, "I believe this is worth standing up for. It's not just standing up for religious rights, it's standing up for my rights as a Canadian citizen; for freedom of speech, freedom of religion. I don't think this is right."

But such quotes show that Mr. Swinimer comes out the loser in this too. Had he been educated in the art of rhetoric and logic—the stuff schools should be teaching, instead of Orwellian "discussions" hosted by representatives from the Nova Scotia Human Rights Divisions—he might have known that a lame t-shirt is not the most persuasive way to convince one's fellow students of the rightness and worth of one's cause.

He also might have realized that a shirt which pronounces judgment does not necessarily follow the logic of Christ's teaching to love our enemies, even our bullies.

and did America few favours in reputation in a region already perceiving it a bully. All that aside, and some may claim this is a rather significant aside, the *capacity* to execute such a clandestine plan, over the course of many months, is in fact quite remarkable. There was no leak, no half-baked group think (à la Bay of Pigs), but instead a slow, methodical, admittedly narrow, group of decision makers that eventually pulled the trigger.

Here are a few of Allison's more significant lessons.

1. The U.S. government remains capable of extraordinary performance, under extremely volatile circumstances. The question is not whether the U.S. government can perform in such a manner, but how the lessons from this raid can be adapted to be put to use in more ordinary policy making processes.

2. Secrets matter, and "when they do, secrecy matters more." The bin Laden lead, tipped by his favourite courier, was discovered already in August 2010. Every day after this fact was a delay which increased the chance of alarm and failure. Who to include in the process? How to ascertain the details, without spooking the target? What style of opera-

An Offense Against Charity

—Peter Stockland—

It always amazes me how Christians clamouring to be heard in the public square are so often convinced they are best understood with both feet in their mouth.

Within a month, we've had two cringe-inducing high-profile examples of the syndrome. The first was during the recent Alberta election campaign. It involved a candidate for the Wildrose Party, a Christian pastor who infamously felt the need to tell the world via his blog that gays would spend eternity in a lake of fire.

Now, there is a serious discussion to be had about the democratic unacceptability of discrediting citizens from public office for believing Hell is a literal place, not mere metaphor. Serious beliefs based on Scripture and tradition must be treated seriously, fairly, and with respect. Holders of such beliefs do not deserve the smug asininity of journalists tingling with the voyeuristic indecency of Elizabethan Londoners ogling the mentally ill at Bedlam.

The faithful, however, have a concomitant obligation to update the ancient Christian admonition to speak the languages of all men to bring all souls to Christ. We don't have to be mush-mouths. We do have to speak within the cultural frame of understanding of our interlocutors.

There was a time in Christendom when salvation could promise the benefit of looking down from Heaven as "the smoke of the damned riseth up forever". That's been a non-starter for a while—rightly so, not just because of contemporary pagan cultural sensibilities but from the offense against Christian charity of anything that suggests vicarious pleasure in others' suffering. Vivid evocation of lakes of fire filled with bobbing homosexuals is precisely such an offense against charity, with a heaping helping of blasphemy tossed in since it presumes to know in advance God's disposition of the souls of the sexually otherwise.

Offending against charity is front and centre, too, in the second example of someone who lives for the Word making a hash of himself by getting tangled up in misbegotten language. Alas, even as perspicacious a Christian as my whipper-snapper colleague Brian Dijkema got drawn into the rush to defend William Swinimer, the Nova Scotia high school student who became last week's 15-minute martyr for refusing to remove a T-shirt that said "Life is wasted without Jesus."

You can judge Dijkema's blog entry from earlier this week for yourself, but I will fairly summarize it by

tion (all options, including a full B-2 bomber strike, were on the table) would ensure success? Experts were needed, but experts were also potential liabilities in a sensitive process of this nature.

3. And so, the group of decision makers was indeed kept relatively small, the details of the raid even being kept out of the president's super-secret morning security briefings to prevent tripping alarms at other agencies and departments. Tightening the decision loop was the price, and mistakes—especially damaging state relations with Pakistan—were made.

4. Perhaps most significant is the circle's extraordinary success in providing the president time between the initial discovery in August of 2010 and the operation of May 2011. The pressure for decision making on an issue of this magnitude, both for domestic political and international security reasons, was enormous. In a town in which National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon mused, "The

saying it ferociously denounces "the system" and "the man" (properly a female school superintendent) for coming down with two-tonne boots on 19-year-old Swinimer.

"The (school) board's decision (to suspend Swinimer) and its reasons for doing so are inane, thin-skinned, and not becoming of a liberal society. It was also probably legally wrong," Dijkema writes.

Reading the blog, I anticipated the mystical appearance of the ubiquitous 1960s rhetorical question—"yeah, and what about Nixon, man?"—just for good measure. It never emerges, but I still half-expect to see young Dijkema trading in his severe formal suits for sloganeering T-shirts of his own. Will pulling out of the Cardus parking lot in a tarted-up 1971 VW bus with his old school tie wrapped, yippy-hippie style, around his head be far behind?

Whatever criticism the school board in question might deserve, it was not wrong to assert its authority to oblige a student to conform to a quite reasonable dress code against wearing sandwich board garments that knowingly and deliberately offend others. Much more importantly, Swinimer's programmatic lapse into the defense of his right to free speech as a Christian is simply indefensible.

He was wrong. And he was wrong as a Christian. For Christians, no life can ever be a waste. Is the life of a leper a waste? A prostitute? A tax collector? The Samaritan woman at the well? The criminals crucified beside Our Lord? No, no and always no.

Why? Because our Christian perspective makes every moment of every life an open possibility for encountering Christ. It is not up to us, who encounter Him imperfectly ourselves, to judge when that moment should be. It is a besmirching of Christian charity to imply that those who have not yet encountered Him are somehow living lives less worthy in His sight.

But there is a deeper, and yet inherently practical, level at which he was wrong. When he was told that students had complained about the T-shirt, he could have heard the urging of Our Lord to also give our shirts to those who ask for our coats. He could have asked what he could do to try to heal any hurt. He could, in other words, have stepped up and modeled Christ. He could, for that moment at least, made his life a life of Christ.

He chose not to. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But it is an amazing reminder for the rest of us that stepping up before speaking up at least keeps both feet directed away from our mouths.

only way to keep a secret is not to tell anybody," the American government and its executive accomplished the seemingly impossible: total secrecy, giving the president precious time to consider his options, to weigh and verify data, before rushing in.

In politics, as in life, many regrettable mistakes are made by urgency, whether false or not. The president would have been vilified in American media if it were discovered he knew of bin Laden's whereabouts for months and did nothing. He took a big risk taking his time, and it paid off.

But the most interesting message Allison has is one of hope: the American government, which some have already consigned to the dust bin of failed imperial administrations, is still up to some tough work. Can Americans now tackle their tax policy, their deficits, and social disparities with the same calm, clear-minded vigour as the assassination of their most hated nemesis? That, I expect, will be the true test of governance.