

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*Have you ever been in a discussion, lecture, homily, conversation, etc wherein you experienced confusion in what the person was saying, knowing it was not the truth, but not necessarily why or not having a response to the nonsense being spouted?*

*According to this author, you have experienced bulls - - t from a bulls - i - - er, or BS from a BSer as those of us with more sensitive ears and sensitive tongues might say..*

*BS has no concern for the truth, rather it is used to promote what the BSer is trying to foist on you.*

*BS is everywhere and all the time, ubiquitous for those who use big words when small ones will do.*

*BS is used when the speaker does not know what he is talking about (apologies for ending a sentence with a preposition).*

*“ ‘ the production of bulls - - t is stimulated whenever a person’s obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic exceed his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic.’ ” The bulls - - tter, in Frankfurt’s theory, ‘does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.’ ”*

*Also in BS, which in logic fallacy is a false appeal to authority, “the intelligence and decency of the authors are presumed; so is their competence in areas other than the specific subject matter.” In other words, the speaker does not really know what he is talking about, rather he uses is prestige as his authority.*

*A liar knows and perverts the truth.*

*The BSer is more dangerous in that he pays no attention to the truth.*

*Characteristics of BS are:*

- Ignorance about the matters which they offer;*
- Competence in other areas, but not in that which the BSer is speaking at the moment;*
- Impressive in length of writing and verbosity;*

- *Turbulent in imagination;*
- *Apocalyptic;*
- *Hyperboles, euphemisms, slogans;*
- *Failure to engage real issues;*
- *Arrangement of facts and concerns in a misleading -and at times clearly false- fashion to produce an impression;*
- *False connotations;*
- *Expansive and independent, with more spacious opportunities for improvisation, color, and imaginative play;*
- *innuendo and simple smearing;*
- *spacious opportunities for improvisation, color, and imaginative play.*

*W.C. Fields is quoted as saying, ““If you can't dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with bulls - - t.”*

*BS can be used to entertain also. A former romantic partner of a now deceased friend of mine, Lynn (a man with one of those ambiguous names) spoke of Lynn's BS, which never was malicious, rather an embellishment to make him look good and to entertain. Quote, “When Lynn tells you something, you know it's not true, and he knows it's not true, but he believes it, and after a while so do you!”*

*Maier has given us an analysis of the techniques of BS. Now you know when you're being BS'ed by someone who wants to change your thinking or behavior, or to shame you for holding to the truth. Even if you cannot refute it at the moment, you now will not be overcome so easily by BS.*

## **CONCERNING BULLS - - T**

[Francis X. Maier](#)

Princeton University, as its graduates will gladly tell you, is the real treasure of the Ivy League. And for good reason: Past and present faculty rank among the great figures of American

higher education - including Harry G. Frankfurt, a Princeton emeritus professor of philosophy. Frankfurt earned his distinguished scholarly reputation with books like [\*Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes's Meditations\*](#) and [\*The Importance of What We Care About: Necessity, Volition, and Love\*](#).

But his masterwork, the work that dwarfs them all (at least in sales), is his *tour de force* of sixty-seven pages, [\*On Bulls - - t\*](#). Originally written as a 1986 paper, *On Bulls - - t* appeared in hardback in 2005 to surprisingly widespread appeal, and garnered media appearances for Frankfurt. (A 2006 sequel, [\*On Truth\*](#), drew sadly less attention.) Wikipedia lists Frankfurt's notable ideas as "higher-order volition," "Frankfurt cases," and the "theory of bulls - - t." Appropriately so. As Frankfurt himself notes in *On Bulls - - t*:

One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bulls - - t. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted... . **In consequence we have no clear understanding of what bulls - - t is, or what function it serves.** And we lack a conscientiously developed appreciation of what it means to us. In other words, we have no theory. I propose to begin the development of a theoretical understanding of bulls - - t, mainly by providing some tentative and exploratory philosophical analysis.

Frankfurt argues that "bulls - - t is unavoidable when circumstances require" -or invite, or encourage- "someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. **Thus the production of bulls - - t is stimulated whenever a person's obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic**

exceed his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic.” The bulls - - tter, in Frankfurt’s theory, “does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.”

For Frankfurt, bulls - - tting is not quite the same as lying. Liars must acknowledge and engage the truth even as they subvert it. By contrast, “[the bulls - - tter] does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it.” Rather, “he pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bulls - - t is a greater enemy of truth than lies are.”

All of which sounds plausible. But theories require testing. So how might we test a “Frankfurt Theory of Bulls - - t”?

Two preliminary observations: First, few would dispute that bulls - - t, like an ocean of plastic debris, is a common element in our politics, especially in an election year. In fact, it’s too common and too obvious a feature for politics to offer a satisfying test case.

Second, no test is likely to be conclusive, because the testers themselves will be accused of adding to the effluence. This is a risk inherent to all such inquiry. Nonetheless, a brief look at three sample articles seems worthwhile, because it suggests the applicability of the Frankfurt theory to ecclesial matters. Note that in each case the intelligence and decency of the authors are presumed; so is their competence in areas other than the specific subject matter of the articles themselves. Note also that a new French text, *Comment L’Amérique veut changer de pape (How America Wants to Change the Pope)*, may offer an especially promising environment for testing Frankfurt’s theory; but currently available only in French, it’s not included here.

We can start with [“Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism in the USA: A surprising ecumenism.”](#) Now a 2017 classic of the genre, it easily meets the Frankfurt standard of speaking “extensively about matters of which [the authors] are to some degree ignorant.” Impressive in its length, turbulent in its imagination (claims of political Manichaeism; a cult of apocalypse, etc.), and generous in use of hyperbole (“ultra-literalism,” “ecumenism of conflict,” “nostalgic dream of a theocratic type state,” etc.), it embodies a peculiar kind of European anxiety about American influence and otherness. In the process, it fails to engage -in fact, seems uninterested in engaging- the real issues and actual terrain in long-term evangelical/ Catholic relations.

A similar anxiety spills over into La Croix International’s [“The rise of ‘devout schismatics’ in the Catholic Church.”](#) Written by an American-based author, the text has a different set of problems: guilt by association (conflating political critics of Pope Francis with religious leaders whose thinking the author finds disagreeable, under the label of “schismatic”); a heavy reliance on hyperbole (as in “ideological purity tests that have fostered a kind of ecclesiological Leninism or Jacobinism in the Catholic Church,” etc.); and the arrangement of facts and concerns in a misleading -and at times clearly false- fashion to produce an impression of Catholic schism.

Finally, the schism theme is accelerated and operationalized in [“US bishops should drop everything and focus on preventing schism.”](#) Again, in the presumed shadow of an imminent crack-up of Church unity, the writer’s hyperbole is thick with a

generous layer of adjectives -outrageous, nefarious, kooky, insidious, shoddy- for his targets.

There are two ironies here. The first is the fact that some “conservative” Catholic groups do indeed deserve serious criticism -but criticism of a more grounded and credible nature- for their excessive, conflict-driven negativity toward the pope and certain bishops. The second is the author’s seeming obliviousness to his own publication’s ample record of feeding conflict and Church division. When the author attributes the sins of “innuendo and simple smearing” to former nuncio Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, quite a few readers will recall the adage about the pot calling the kettle black.

In the Frankfurt theory, the “person who undertakes to bulls - - t” has a focus that “is panoramic rather than particular. He does not limit himself to inserting a certain falsehood at a specific point, and thus is not constrained by the truths surrounding that point or intersecting with it.” Rather, “the mode of creativity” upon which bulls - - t relies “is less analytical and less deliberative than that which is mobilized in lying. It is more expansive and independent, with more spacious opportunities for improvisation, color, and imaginative play. This is less a matter of craft than of art. Hence the familiar notion of the ‘bulls - - t artist.’”

I suggest that the theory has merit.