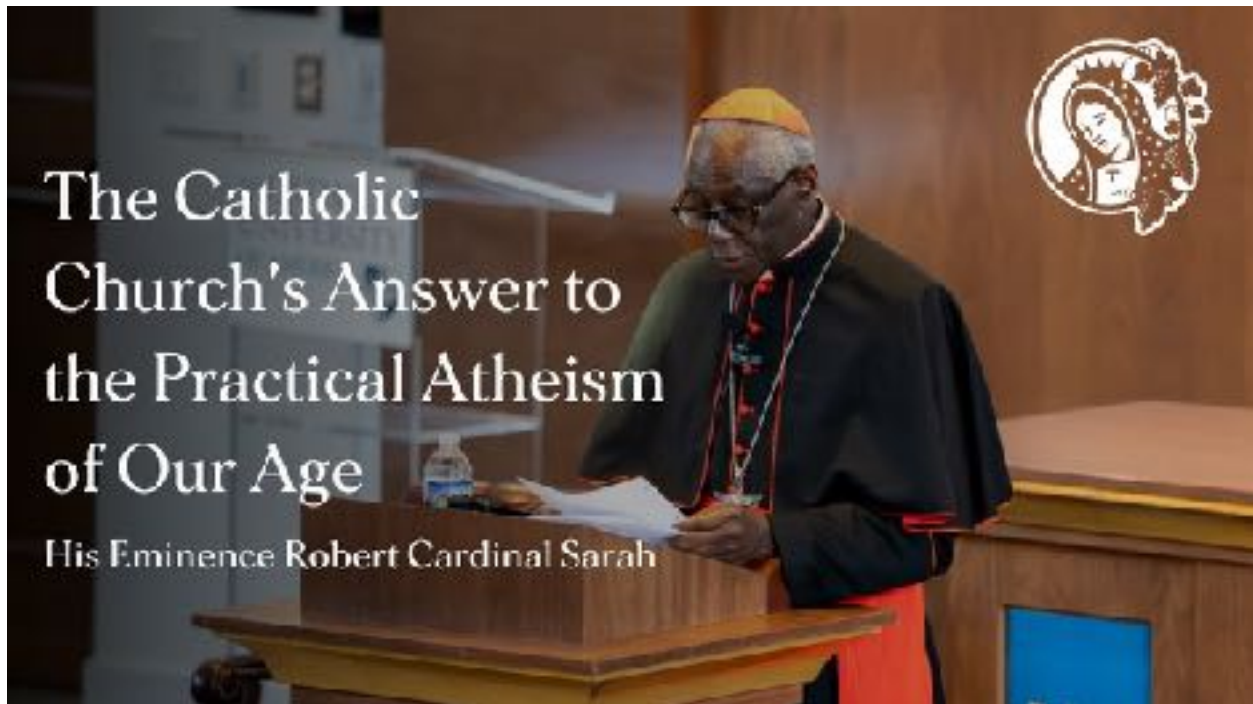


The Catholic Church's Enduring Answer To The Practical Atheism Of Our Age

by Robert Cardinal Sarah
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I. Introductory Remarks

I am grateful to meet with you, distinguished guests of the Napa Institute. Mr Busch: thank you for the invitation and the Catholic Information Center for your co-sponsorship. My address – “The Catholic Church’s Enduring Answer to the Practical

Atheism of our Age” – reflects well your mission: to prepare leaders to bring truth, faith, and value into the modern world through liturgy, formation, and community.

First, however, I would like to say something about the Catholic Church here in the United States. I have had the privilege of traveling to your country many times and I have found it a place of great importance for the universal Church. The United States is part of what is commonly called “the West”. The West, while not the birthplace of Christianity, is the home of much of what was once called Christendom, and much of what has become modern society, the roots of which are firmly European.

The cultural, economic, political, and, to a lesser extent, religious identity of America track in broad strokes to that of Europe. While America is the fruit of European faith and enlightenment, nonetheless it is unique in many significant ways. With respect to the Catholicism of the United States, it is well known that Catholics were for a long time a recognizable minority. Catholics went to different churches and schools; they fasted on Fridays; they celebrated the holy days differently; they often lived in ethnic neighborhoods. In short, Catholics were different. Nonetheless, they were also proudly American. Their faith inspired a patriotism. In World War II, Catholics fought and died for freedom alongside their Protestant and Jewish brothers and sisters. It was the faith of Catholics that inspired such sacrifice. They were a religious minority, firm in the faith, even if treated as second class citizens at times, or worse.

Since the 1960’s Catholics have increasingly lost their unique identity. They are no longer a recognizable minority because they have fully assimilated into American culture. Catholics here are often American first, Catholic second.

The consequences are obvious. Many Catholics hold the same beliefs as the general population. You have a self-identified

Catholic President who is an example of what Cardinal Gregory recently described as a “Cafeteria Catholic”. Many of your Catholic public officials are in the same category. Many of your Catholic hospitals and universities are Catholic in name only. The minority status of so many things **Catholic** here in the United States, which provided an important witness to the fullness of our **Catholic faith, has been traded for cultural assimilation.**

I have visited the United States enough to know that, while the uniqueness of the Catholic community has been lost at a macro level, there is much to celebrate about specific aspects of the Catholic community here. The Catholic Church of the United States is very different from the Church in Europe. The faith in Europe is dying, and in some places it is dead. The interaction between severely secular governments and the Church have not served the faith well there.

Some of that exists in the United States but there is also a dynamism of faith here that does not exist in other places in the West. I have seen it firsthand. As President of the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, I witnessed personally how Americans are amongst the most generous people in the world. Thank you. Your seminaries have largely been reformed, lay apostolates are breathing new life into the faith, in parishes there are pockets of life, and my sense is that your episcopal leadership is generally committed to the Gospel, faith in Jesus Christ, and a preservation of our Sacred Tradition. No doubt there are divisions and internal conflict, but there is not a wholesale rejection of the Catholic faith as we see in many parts of Europe and South America. My observation is that there are models of faith here in the United States that could perhaps be a lesson for other western countries.

With that being said, your **culture more broadly speaking has become hostile to the faith. There is a practical atheism that has taken over your country and is threatening the common good.** This is what I would like to

reflect on with you today: the practical atheism that is infecting the West and slipping noticeably into the Church herself.

II. Practical Atheism

As I noted in a recent address to the Bishops of Cameroon: **“many Western prelates are paralyzed by the idea of opposing the world. They dream of being loved by the world.** They have lost the concern of being a sign of contradiction. Perhaps **too much material wealth leads to compromise with world affairs.** Poverty is a guarantee of freedom for God. I believe that the Church of our time is experiencing the temptation of atheism. Not intellectual atheism. But this subtle and dangerous state of mind: fluid and practical atheism. The latter is a dangerous disease even if its first symptoms seem mild.”

By practical atheism, I mean a loss of the sense of the Gospel and the centrality of Jesus Christ. Scripture becomes a tool for a secular purpose rather than the call to conversion. I do not think this is widespread among your bishops and priests here in the United States, thanks be to God, but it is becoming more common among other regions of the West. **Too many do not take the faith seriously and treat it as a hindrance to dialogue.**

St. Paul warned us of this: “For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths” (2 Tim 4:3-4).

And yet we know that **the faith, and Scripture and the sacraments in particular, give us life.** That’s why St. Paul also charged us to, “proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2).

There is, of course, no pure atheism. One must put his or her trust in something. So, **the question is not whether you believe in God or not, but what do you believe in; what is your lower-case “g” – god?** For many in the secular culture, it is **sex** and all its **libertarian derivatives**. For others, it is a **positivist understanding of nature, where objective data is the only factor by which decisions should be made**. And yet for others, it is **wealth or power or social status or social activism**.

All of these are corrupt and false idols by which we elevate something other than the one, true God, in all His majesty, love and mercy—just as the Israelites worshipped the Golden Calf. This is nothing new. Creation, in its many forms, has always competed with the Creator for our loyalty. What is of particular interest is how this sort of practical atheism has seeped into the Church. I would like to review what our three most recent popes have said about this as a reminder that the Church is the prophetic voice for our times and **we must remain vigilant to voices from within that wish to alter her voice to something palatable to secular culture**.

III. Saint Pope John Paul II

The great Pope Saint John Paul II understood the dangers of atheism as well as anyone. He lived through the horrors of a political system disconnected from God and all its consequences. While many of the horrors of atheistic communism and fascism happened within our lifetime, or at least within my lifetime, we seem to have forgotten its brutal lessons. Millions, perhaps hundreds of millions, of lives were sacrificed for ideological purposes driven by a loss of the sacred. We all know that family, human life, the dignity of the human person created in the image of God, and after His likeness, are the most sacred of all living creatures. Nonetheless, murder, torture, rape, families torn apart,

and so many other **horrific sins against the dignity of the person were committed in the name of lies that separate man from God.**

Saint John Paul understood all of this and leveraged the weapons of faith against the atheism that emanated from communism and the East. On one level, he won that war but, at another level, the war continues at a global and national level—and even within each one of us. As Solzhenitsyn described it, “**the line separating good and evil passes** not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but **right through every human heart—and through all human hearts.**” This is the battle each one of us faces and even the Church experiences it in an eschatological way. The battle is not “out there” but here, starting within each one of us.

This localization of the distancing from God is something each of us must examine on a regular basis. In what or whom do we find meaning? As I have said elsewhere: it must be God, otherwise we are left with nothing.

“God or nothing,” is the title of one of my books. This is true for each one of us but also for the Church herself.

In a 1999 General Audience, Pope John Paul spoke about a practical atheism that can be applied to some in the Church today:

“Starting with Sacred Scripture, we immediately note that there is no mention of ‘theoretical’ atheism, while there is a concern to reject ‘practical’ atheism.... Rather than atheism, the Bible speaks of wickedness and idolatry. Whoever prefers a series of human products, falsely considered divine, living and active, to the true God is **wicked and idolatrous.**”

We see this in the Church when sociology or “lived experience” becomes the guiding principle that shape moral judgment. It is not an outright rejection of God, but it

pushes God to the side. How often do we hear from theologians, priests, religious, and even some bishops or bishop conferences that we need to adjust our moral theology for considerations that are solely human?

There is an attempt to ignore, if not reject, the traditional approach to moral theology, as defined so well by Veritatis Splendor and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. If we do, everything becomes conditional and subjective. **Welcoming everyone means ignoring Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium.**

None of the proponents of this paradigm shift within the Church reject God outright but **they treat Revelation as secondary, or at least on equal footing with experience and modern science. *This is how practical atheism works. It does not deny God but functions as if God is not central.***

We see this approach not only in moral theology but also in liturgy. Sacred traditions that have served the Church well for hundreds of years are now portrayed as dangerous. So much focus on the horizontal pushes out the vertical, as if God is an experience rather than an ontological reality.

There is an implied understanding by the proponents of practical atheism that faith somehow limits the person. They take St. Irenaeus' axiom – “the glory of God is man fully alive” – to mean **the highest end of man is to be fully himself. This is true if we understand man as a creature made for God, but the practical atheists see God and his moral order as a limiting factor. Our happiness, according to this way of thinking, is found in being who we want to be, rather than conforming ourselves to God and his order.**

It is all very “now” oriented. What has meaning is that which speaks to the contemporary moment, divorced from our individual and corporate history. This is why the traditions of our

faith can be so easily dismissed. **According to the practical atheists, tradition is binding, not freeing.**

And yet it is through our traditions that we more fully know ourselves. We are not isolated beings unconnected to our past. **Our past is what shapes who we are today.**

Salvation history is the supreme example of this. **Our faith always echoes back to our origins**, from Adam and Eve, through the kingdoms of the Old Testament, to Christ as the fulfillment of the old law, to the advent of the Church and the development of all that was given to us from Christ. This is who we are as a Christian people. **It is all radically connected.** We are a people who live within the context of who God created us to be, which has been received more deeply over the centuries but is always connected to the revelation of Christ, who is the same yesterday and today. **To pursue fulfillment by lowering our sights to our experience, emotions, or desires is to reject who we are as God's creatures, endowed with sublime dignity and created ultimately for Him.**

IV. Pope Benedict XVI

This brings us to Pope Benedict XVI. He, too, understood firsthand the dangers of atheism, explicit or implicit. His work as theologian, prefect, and pope had a particular emphasis on the life of faith in Europe, which he sought to renew. He understood the West was under attack from an atheism within the traditionally Christian cultures of Europe.

He was even more explicit than John Paul about his concerns regarding the loss of faith within the Church. As pope he said:

“A particularly dangerous phenomenon for faith has arisen in our times: indeed, a form of atheism exists which we define, precisely, as ‘practical’, in

which the truths of faith or religious rites are not denied but are merely deemed irrelevant to daily life, detached from life, pointless. So it is that people often believe in God in a superficial manner, and live ‘as though God did not exist’ (etsi Deus non daretur). In the end, however, this way of life proves even more destructive because it leads to indifference to faith and to the question of God” (General Audience, November 14, 2012).

In a 1958 lecture, years before Vatican II, which suggests our current situation has roots much deeper than the cultural revolution of the 1960’s and 1970’s, he said:

“This so-called Christian Europe for almost four hundred years has become the birthplace of a new paganism, which is growing steadily in the heart of the Church and threatens to undermine her from within.”

The Church, he continued, “is no longer, as she once was, a Church composed of pagans who have become Christians, but a Church of pagans who still call themselves Christians, but actually have become pagans. Paganism resides today in the Church herself” (The New Pagans in the Church, 1958)

This is a harsh critique of the Church, and yet this was said back in **1958**, so the criticism that there exists a practical atheism in the Church is not new to this moment. It is, nonetheless, more apparent now than it was when Joseph Ratzinger made these observations and it comes in the loss of devout Christian living, or an obvious Christian culture, and in the form of public dissent, sometimes even from high-ranking officials or prominent institutions.

How many Catholics attend weekly Mass? How many are involved in the local church? How many live as if Christ exists, or as if Christ is found in his or her neighbor, or with the firm belief

that the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ? How many priests celebrate the Holy Eucharist as if they are truly alter Christus, and, even more so, as if they are ipse Christus – Christ Himself? How many believe in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist? The answer is too few. We live as if we do not need redemption through the blood of Christ. That is the practical reality for too many in the Church. The crisis is not so much the secular world and its evils, but the lack of faith within the Church.

The synodal process, particularly in a few European countries, is an example where dissident views are promoted within the context of the institutional Church. Cardinal Zen has expounded on this effectively already in his letter to the Synod participants last year, but I would like to add some additional thoughts.

We are told that the Synod on Synodality is to bring the whole Church into dialogue. Perhaps this can be a path through which the Holy Spirit speaks to the Church. That would be a blessing. There is concern, however, that this is not a path through which the *sensus fidelium* is exercised.

There are voices at the Synod that are not speaking from within the *sensus fidei*. Just because someone identifies as Catholic does not mean they are part of the *sensus fidelium*. To be Catholic is more than a cultural identification; it is a profession of faith. It has a particular content of faith. To move outside that content, both in belief and practice, is to move outside the faith. And it is a grave danger to consider all voices legitimate. This would lead to a cacophony of voices that amount to noise, which seems to be growing louder these days. As Cardinal Ratzinger said:

“A faith we can decide for ourselves is no faith at all. And no minority has any reason to allow a majority to prescribe what it should believe. Either the faith and

its practice come to us from the Lord by way of the Church and her sacramental services, or there is no such thing” (Truth and Tolerance [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004], Part 2, Section 1).

This approach to the faith leads to confusion and instability. Again, from Ratzinger:

“Everything that men make can also be undone again by others ... Everything that one majority decides upon can be revoked by another majority. A church based on human resolutions becomes merely a human church ... Opinion replaces faith” (Called to Communion [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991], p139).

This attitude toward a false freedom and conformism seems to be growing within the Church. For example, some prominent **Prelates have expressed openness to the prospect of women’s ordination, suggesting doctrine can change. This is the sort of thing that Catholics should believe is impossible and yet we have a senior ranking official espousing an ecclesiology that rejects the stability of doctrine.** The implication, of course, is that we are free to define the faith as we see fit. This is not Catholic, and it is a source of great confusion that is harming the Church and the faithful. Thankfully, Pope Francis has been clear that this is not possible, but confusion grows around these questions when the global synodal process encourages such considerations. The example of Germany is well known but important to remember.

Cardinal Ratzinger identified this crisis of faith, this practical atheism, as the fruit of bad ecclesiology. He said this:

“the Church of Christ is not a party, not an association, not a club. **Her deep and permanent structure is not democratic but sacramental, consequently hierarchical.** For the hierarchy based on the apostolic succession is the indispensable condition to arrive at the strength, the reality of the sacrament. **Her authority is not based on the majority of votes; it is based on the authority of Christ himself,** which he willed to pass on to men who were to be his representatives until his definitive return” (The Ratzinger Report, p49).

This is the heart of the matter. The faith, the Church, is based on Christ. Without Christ we, we have nothing. Too many in the Church find the heart of the faith in her affiliates. Yes, in a certain sense **we make up the mystical body of Christ but only to the degree that we live in Christ and our faith is centered in Christ.**

V. Francis

Pope Francis has continued the call against atheism. He does it differently than John Paul II and Benedict XVI, but he is clear that life without God is a path to destruction. Back in 2015 he said:

“In a society increasingly marked by secularism and threatened by atheism, we run the risk of living as if God did not exist. People are often tempted to take the place of God, to consider themselves the criterion of all things, to control them, to use everything according to their own will. It is so important to remember, however, that our life is a gift from God, and that we must depend on him,

confide in him, and turn towards him always” (Meeting with delegation of Conference of European Rabbis).

The Holy Father understands there are pockets within the Church that do not live from the heart of Jesus. He exhorts bishops and priests to live lives that are consistent with the Gospel. He has said repeatedly that the eclipse of God leads to the destruction of man. Let us take his call to remember God seriously, especially for those of us in the Church.

VI. Concluding Remarks

Where do we go from here? Let me speak to the question as a bishop. **Bishops need to raise their voices and become clear teachers of the faith, witnessing by both word and holiness of life.** The unity of faith comes through the office of bishop, which must be reaffirmed today. There is too much confusion circling the Church, and it is up to us bishops to provide clarity so the lay faithful can themselves be witnesses to the truth.

As Pope John Paul II said:

“The bishop is called in a particular way to be a prophet, witness and servant of hope ... relying on the Word of God and holding firmly to hope, which like a sure and steadfast anchor reaches to the heavens (cf. Heb 6:18-20), the bishop stands in the midst of the Church as a vigilant sentinel, a courageous prophet, a credible witness and a faithful servant of Christ” (Pastores Gregis, #3).

This requires a willingness to be a sign of contradiction (see Lk 2:34) to the contemporary world and, yes, to parts of the contemporary church.

This responsibility will be fulfilled through right teaching and holiness—**holiness that is rooted in a personal and intimate relationship with Christ.** Pope Francis has said, “There is no witness without a coherent lifestyle! Today there is no great need for masters, but for courageous witnesses, who are convinced and convincing; witnesses who are not ashamed of the Name of Christ and of His Cross” (Homily to new metropolitan archbishops, June 29, 2015).

Let me finish by circling back to where I began. The United States is unlike Europe. **The faith here is still young and maturing.** This young vitality is a gift to the Church. Just as we saw the African Church, which is also young, provide a heroic witness to the faith in the wake of that misguided document, *Fiducia Supplicans*, and save the Church from grave error, the Church here in the United States can also be a witness to the rest of the world.

The cultural atheism that has taken over the West does not have to take over the Church here. You have good episcopal leadership, good young priests, communities with young, vibrant Catholic families. You must foster the growth of all of this for the sake of your families, but also for the sake of the global Church. The Napa Institute and the Catholic Information Center are integral and vital to this mission. You are to be commended for what you are doing.

America is big and powerful politically, economically, and culturally. With this comes great responsibility. Imagine what could happen if America were to become home to even more vibrant Catholic communities! **The faith of Europe is dying or dead. The Church needs to draw life from places like Africa and America where the faith is not dead.**

Perhaps it is surprising to some that the United States can be a place of spiritual renewal, but I believe it to be so. If Catholics in this country can be a sign of contradiction to your culture, the Holy Spirit will do great things through you.

Again, thank you, Mr. Busch and the Napa Institute, and the Catholic Information Center for this opportunity to speak with you today in the Capitol of your country and on the campus of the Catholic University of America. May the faith of your people grow so Christ's light might shine more brightly. Thank you.