

REMARKS BY GEORGE WEIGEL

- thank you
- my task: to propose an analysis of the cultural circumstances in which you must work to foster vocations
- let me emphasize at the outset that I come to you, not as an American commentator, but as a fellow-Catholic, who has drawn much – even most – of the analysis that follows from John Paul II
- so: in sum – you are working to foster vocations in Europe, and Europe is dying
- it is dying demographically: “lowest low fertility”
- it is dying politically: Pierre Manent on “depoliticization” and decision-making by bureaucracies and judges
- it is dying historically, in the sense that Europe is not living in continuity with the moral truths that gave birth to the unique civilization called “Europe”
- in all three of these forms of “dying,” and in others we could cite, the cause of this “morbidity” is spiritual boredom, or what the Orthodox theologian David Hart calls “metaphysical boredom” – a loss of awe and wonder at the very mystery of being itself
- I prefer the term “spiritual boredom,” because in trying to understand post-modern Europe, I rely on Henri de Lubac’s analysis of late modern Europe, in what he called “the drama of atheistic humanism” – the idea that the God of the Bible must be expelled from European society, culture, and politics, because the God of the Bible is the enemy of human freedom, authenticity, maturity, and responsibility
- as Father de Lubac noted, this idea was a “great reversal,” for the God of the Bible had appeared in human history as a liberator
- in ancient Middle East
- in ancient Greece
- there have always been “atheists,” but “atheistic humanism” was something genuinely new: a compound of different ideas that, taken together, made for a lethal cultural cocktail
- ; four examples:

- Comte's positivism: knowledge through scientific method only
- Feuerbach's subjectivism: God as the projection of humanity's noblest aspirations
- Marx's materialism: distorted view of dynamics of history
- Nietzsche's will-to-power: distorted view of morality

- taken together, these ideas, and others, produced a degradation on European high culture that led, in fairly short order, to the great 20th century ideologies and to the slaughters that made the 20th century the bloodiest time in human history

- why 1914-1991 (the dates that truly define "the 20th century")?
- answer: the breakdown of moral reason in the civilization that had given the world the very idea of "moral reason"

- one example of the enduring appeal of "atheistic humanism:" the controversy over whether Christianity could be cited as a source of 21st century Europe's commitment to human rights, democracy, and the rule of law during the 2003-2004 debate over the European Constitutional Treaty

- today's equation: ("spiritual boredom" at a mass level) + ("political correctness" and aggressive secularism among elites) = "dictatorship of relativism and increasing pressures on the Church to conform"

- example: Spain

- the further, and perhaps deeper, problem was defined for me in a conversation with Cardinal Vingt-Trois of Paris eighteen months ago: there is nothing to argue with here

- you can't have a real conversation, much less a real debate, in the post-modern sandbox where people are absorbed by aggressive secularism, metaphysical and epistemological skepticism, and moral relativism

- if there is only "your truth" and "my truth," but nothing we both recognize as "THE truth," then serious intellectual encounter and dialogue are very, very difficult, and perhaps even impossible

THEREFORE:

- work for vocations in this cultural context cannot be separated from the broader project of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the New Evangelization; and New Evangelization must address cultural disease of post-modern spiritual boredom

- New Evangelization must include the proposal of “freedom for excellence,” as distinguished from “freedom of indifference”
- Pinckaers, “Sources of Christian Ethics”
- New Evangelization must challenge “black legends” of history by demonstrating how the Catholic Church is now the world’s primary institutional defender of human rights and by showing how the Church (and John Paul II) shaped “1989,” thus making the new, expanded European Union possible
- New Evangelization must challenge the dictatorship of relativism by showing how this is ultimately dehumanizing
- Benedict XVI (following Toynbee): “creative minorities” can change the trajectory of history
 - true of early Church and its role in shaping “Europe”
 - true of all subsequent historical periods of Catholic reform, in which internal Church reform shaped the wider culture (e.g., Cluny; Gregory VII; Counter-Reformation; 19th century Catholic reform)
 - true in our own time when Church demonstrated that conscience is a powerful instrument in changing what seemed unchangeable – central and eastern Europe’s domination by the Soviet empire; and this is of far more relevance today than any number of “black legends”
- Gospel still the most dramatic proposal of human possibility being offered in the world today; Gospel and Christian anthropology of John Paul II is the key to Europe’s cultural self-renewal
- therefore, it is by making the Gospel interesting and compelling again that we best serve the cause of vocations in Europe