

IF IT IS TRUE, THEN IT HAS TO BE TRUE EVERYWHERE

5th Core Principle: We will support true authority, the ability to 'author' life in others, regardless of the group. (non-tribal)

St. Vincent of Lerin in the year 434 was the first to define the word “catholic,” and it was used by scholars for much of the first millennium of Christianity and called the “Vincentian Canon.” It became a way to discern what was the true belief of the church. Vincent’s in-house principle was amazingly simple and clear and yet also shocking and seemingly impossible: “Now in the Catholic Church itself we take the greatest care to hold *that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all*. That is truly and properly 'Catholic,' as is shown by the very force and meaning of the word, which comprehends everything almost universally.” In other words, if it is true, then it has to be true everywhere and all the time, or it is not true!

Most of history has been content with cultural truth, denominational truth, national truth, scientific truth, rational truth, factual truth, personal truth, etc. These are all needed and helpful, but the job of true religion is to *detach* from all of these and yet *use* all of these in the largest possible synthesis, and find the Big Truth that is beyond any of these smaller tribal truths. This is what makes authentic religion inherently subversive and threatening to all systems of power and control. It always says, “Yes, but!” or “Yes, and there is still more.” The philosophical principle used in Scholastic philosophy was called *sic et non* (Latin for “yes and no”), and allowed the early Christian universities to argue both sides of everything without being considered heretical or antagonistic. It always opened up to the bigger picture without closing down smaller pictures. We would do well to return to such horizons of learning.

In Biblical language or Islamic language, the first commandment is always something like this: “God alone is God!” It sounds like you are saying nothing until you realize how hard it is to refuse the creation of smaller gods and idols. Humans tend to be idol-makers by choice, practice, and compulsion. Jesus’ metaphor for this Big Truth beyond our little truths was the “Reign of God” or the “Kingdom of God.” Maybe we would just say “in the light of eternity” or “in the final analysis” or “in the eyes of God.” But these are all ways of moving away from tribal thinking and looking out at life from eyes other than our own, and larger than our own. It is hard work. Philosophically, this larger and constantly recurring wisdom was called the Perennial Tradition. No one group owns the Perennial Tradition, but they own parts of it, and the *group that owns most of it is the one that can honor and include all of the other perennial parts*. We see this inclusivity to an amazing degree in Jesus, and for me it is the clear indication that you in fact practice the true religion. The true religion is precisely the one that can see and honor God everywhere, and not just in themselves.

The brilliant work of the socio-biologist E. O. Wilson is offering us new understanding of the deep human identification with group and tribe. He says our identification with our own groups—in all of history—was the way we found meaning and security in a chaotic world. “I am too small, but my group is big and strong and right” takes away loads of anxiety. He says that it made the whole world less disorienting and dangerous, and people do not tend to move beyond this frame easily or without major resistance. But it is also a shield against all kinds of larger truth: precisely because this or that idea did not come from my group, and so I do not even consider it as worthy of attention! This has kept history at a very low level of consciousness.

Tribal thinking allows us to build on a certain sense of ourselves as loving and altruistic, because we are that way to a certain degree *inside* of our specific family, ethnicity, neighborhood, or religion—where we strengthen the social bonds that in fact profit us in the long run! Such a social identity does wonders for your personal identity, or lack of one. But, in fact, *we can now be quite selfish and even violent toward other groups—and such negativity will actually be considered as virtue!* Our ego is protected from both sides; we get to be selfish while thinking of ourselves as loving, generous, and even sacrificial.

The tribal ego gets us off scot-free, and all in the name of loyalty, heroism, obedience, and holy war! Is this not the story line of much of history? Now we can understand Jesus’ statement in the Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard how it was said: ‘You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy’ (Leviticus 19:18), but I say to you ‘love your enemies’” (Matthew 5:43-44). He recognizes the common disguise with 20/20 vision. Most religion has not had such clear vision.

Seeing this rather consistent pattern in the world of religion, and our Christian avoidance and denial of inter-faith and ecumenical cooperation, we felt this needed to be a foundational principle of the CAC. We are always to work with—and for—anybody who is willing to work with us. We have no time for turf battles, “I am for Paul,” “I am for Apollos,” “I am for Cephas.” Christ has not been parceled out, says Paul (1 Corinthians 1:12-13). It does not matter who said it first or who got the credit, or even who said it best. If it is the Perennial Tradition, it is common domain and copyrighted by the Holy Spirit alone.

Such recognition of “authority” beyond our own group is structurally demanded of Christians by the very fact that our Bible includes the Hebrew Bible! Inclusivity is our process from the very start. Every Christian liturgy reads authoritative texts from the Torah, the Jewish Prophets, and the Wisdom Writings. We listen to Abraham, Moses, and Elijah who never knew Jesus. The implications should be clear: we have been taught by non-Christian authorities from the beginning! The door is opened, and must remain open or we become ethnic instead of catholic, and avoid the Vincentian canonical principle.

The pattern continues with John’s Gospel using the concept of *the Logos* (John 1:1), which was first used by Heraclitus and the Greek Stoic philosophers. Soon we have Jewish Peter coming to his daring and hard-won realization that “God does not have favorites among nations” (Acts 10:34). Paul is willing to quote non-Jewish sources and worldviews to the Athenians (Acts 17:26-29) in order to preach a more universal message. We also have centuries of reliance by many first millennium Fathers and Doctors of the Church (too many to count!) upon the “pagan” categories of Plato and Aristotle—to make their Christian points! This clear pattern kept Thomas Aquinas from being recognized and canonized for some time, and yet today his revolutionary attempt to “baptize” Aristotle is deemed the highest level of Catholic orthodoxy. Augustine and Bonaventure did much the same with Plato. This is our heritage, and it is a heritage of *using universal wisdom to teach Christian truth*. Visit the Vatican and you will see Oracles, Sibyls, pagan philosophers, poets, and mythological figures everywhere in the art and statuary. Whatever could support orthodoxy was to be used, and even in the Sistine chapel, where we elect the Pope! Dante has the Roman poet Virgil leading him and teaching him through the “Inferno” and “Purgatorio.” If we did any of these things today, we would be highly suspect and surely criticized for softening the message, dangerous accommodation, or “consorting with the enemy.” In so many ways, the siege mentality of the Reformations, the Enlightenment, and modern secularism has sent us into a tailspin—backwards. Exclusion is our style, inclusion is rare.

We come from a tradition of both faith and reason. It was once called the “Catholic Synthesis.” The first question was not “Is it directly taught in Scripture?” but “Is it true?” And this truth might well be demonstrated—in fact would have to be demonstrated—by disciplines other than Scripture, like science, mathematics, biology, and history, etc. If it is true, then it will be true from all angles. We should, however, use the negative argument that it could not be in direct contradiction to a clear teaching of Scripture. That is where many of the Catholic-Protestant arguments of history have come from, and they were often very clarifying arguments—if they proceeded by the *sic et non* method of teaching—but for most of history we were dualistic thinkers and could not rise to this occasion. But now we can!

We legitimately play upon the very word “authority” in the FifthCore Principle, as one who “authors.” These two words are from the same Latin root (*auctor*), and I think with very good reason. Authority must finally be inherent, it must be able to do the job, to generate what it commands, *to engender the actual reward that it promises by its commands*. Jesus again puts it well, when he says that the function of law and authority is “to achieve its purpose” (Matthew 5:18). Six times in a row Jesus repeats the phrase, “It was said, and I say!” (Matthew 5:21-44), in each case leading us to his “authoring” of people at a much deeper level than the mere letter of the law was able to do. Paul takes the same liberties many times, and on occasion even admits he is doing it! “This is from me and not from the Lord!” (1 Corinthians 7:12). A Master Teacher knows when the law is achieving its purpose and when it is not, and knows when to change the rules to bring about actual growth and life in people.

Religious authority is not like secular authority. It is not an end in itself, but for the sake of “life and life more abundantly” (John 10:10). St. Thomas Aquinas’ principle was “*Prius vita quam doctrina*” (*Summa Theologica*, “De Anima”, II, 37) translated as “Life itself is more important than doctrines.” Our Fifth Core Principle is important to the future of the CAC and the Living School for Action and Contemplation because it will keep us both grounded in the Perennial Tradition and its natural authority, and also help us to see how broad, common, and recurrent that Perennial Tradition is. Any temptation toward individualism is taken from us by our

necessary “obedience” to this Big Picture Wisdom (Romans 16:25-27). If a non-Catholic, a non-Christian, a non-white person, a non-American, a gay, a non-educated person, a non-male, says it, our only question is to be “Is it true?” This will allow us to follow that question with every possible *yes* and also with any necessary *no*.

If it is the Perennial Tradition, it will somehow keep recurring at different levels and in different forms and from different voices and disciplines, and in Vincent of Lerin’s daunting phrase, it will have “been believed everywhere, always and by all,” which is still the best argument for Great Truth. No tribe, nor its language, will ever encompass the magnificent and always mysterious Reign of God.