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AWAKENING FROM NIHILISM THE TEMPLETON PRIZE ADDRESS

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This essay is adapted from an address presented by Mr. Novak at Westminster Abbey on May 5, 1994. He is the twenty-fourth recipient of The Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

As we draw near the close of the twentieth century, we owe ourselves a reckoning.

This century was history's bloodiest. From this revered and mortally threatened Abbey some fifty years ago, one could hear the screech of falling bombs. At a time they didn't choose, and in a way they didn't foresee, more than a hundred million persons in Europe found their lives brutally taken from them. An earlier Templeton laureate, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, has agreed that, beyond the war dead, 66 million prisoners perished in the Soviet labor camps. Add the scores of millions dead in Asia, Africa, and the other continents since 1900.

Nor is there any guarantee that the twenty-first century will not be bloodier.

And yet the world has drawn four painful lessons from the ashes of our century. First, even under conditions of nihilism, better than cowardice is fidelity to truth. From fidelity to truth, inner liberty is wrested.

Second, the boast of Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler that dictatorship is more vigorous than "decadent democracy" was empty. It led to concentration camps.

Third, the claim that socialism is morally superior to capitalism, and better for the poor, was also empty. It paved the road to serfdom.

Fourth, vulgar relativism, now widely ascendant, undermines the culture of liberty. If it triumphs,

free institutions may not survive the twenty-first century.

For three centuries, modernity has been supremely fruitful in its practical discoveries—in, for example, its magnificent institutions of political and economic liberty. But it has been spectacularly wrong in its underlying philosophy of life. An age wrong about God is almost certain to be wrong about man.

History, Hegel once remarked, is a butcher's bench. *Homo homini lupus*. Many sober inquirers, seeing how prodigally in this century the bodies of individuals have been thrown around like sacks of bones, understandably asserted that God is dead.

And yet, in this dark night of a century, a first fundamental lesson was drawn from the bowels of nihilism itself: *Truth matters*. Even for those unsure whether there is a God, a truth is different from a lie. Torturers can twist your mind, even reduce you to a vegetable, but as long as you retain the ability to say "Yes" or "No" as truth alone commands, they cannot own you.

Further, as the prison literature of the twentieth century—a very large literature, alas—abundantly testifies, truth is not simply a pragmatic compromise, although torturers try seductively to present it so. "It is such a little thing," they say. "All you have to do is say 'yes,' sign here, and this will all be over. Then you can

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forget about it. What harm will come of it? We have been in power for seventy years, we will always be in power. Be reasonable. Accept reality. It is such a little thing. Who will ever know? Just sign and be done with it."

Yet millions have known in such circumstances that their identity as free women and free men was at stake; more exactly, their salvation. Irina Ratushinskaya, Raoul Wallenberg, Andrei Sakharov, Maximilian Kolbe, Vladimir Bukovsky, Vaclav Havel, Anatoly Sharansky, Pavel Bratinka, Tomas Halik, Mihailo Mihailov—let us summon up the witnesses, the endless scroll of honor of our century.

To obey truth is to be free, and in certain extremities nothing is more clear to the tormented mind, nothing more vital to the survival of self-respect, nothing so important to one's sense of remaining a worthy human being—of being no one's cog, part of no one's machine, resister to death against the kingdom of lies. In fidelity to truth lies human dignity.

There is nothing recondite in this. Simple people have often seen it more clearly than clerks. This is the plain insight that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn expressed when he wrote in his 1970 Nobel Address that one single truth is more powerful than all the weapons in the world, and that, dark as that hour then seemed in the world, with communism everywhere advancing, truth would prevail against the lie; and that those who clung to truth would overturn tyranny. (He was correct in his prediction. Truth did prevail over arms—we are witnesses to history; it is our obligation to teach this to our children.)

What those learned who suffered in prison in our time—what Dostoevsky learned in prison in the Tsar's time—is that we human beings do not own the truth. Truth is not "merely subjective," not something we make up, or choose, or cut to today's fashions or the morrow's pragmatism—we *obey* the truth. We do not "have" the truth, truth owns us, truth possesses us. Truth is far larger and deeper than we are. Truth leads us where it will. It is not ours for mastering.

And yet, even in prison, truth is a master before whom a free man stands erect. In obeying the evidence of truth, no human being is humiliated—rather, he is in that way alone ennobled. In obeying truth, we find the way of liberty marked out "as a lamp unto our feet." In obeying truth, a man becomes aware of participating in something greater than himself, which measures his inadequacies and weaknesses.

Truth is the light of God within us. For us its humble mode is inquiry, seeking, restlessness. Innermost at the core of us, even as children, is an irrepressible drive to ask questions. That unlimited drive is God's dynamic presence in us, the seed of our dissatisfaction with everything less than the infinite.

The Grand Refusal of the modern age to say "yes" to God is based upon a failure both of intellect and of imagination. Modernity's mistake is to have imagined God as if He were different from truth, alien from ourselves, "out there," like a ghostly object far in space, to serve Whom is to lose our own autonomy. Modernity has imagined God to be a ghostly version of the tyrants we have actually seen in the twentieth century. It took the real tyrants of our time, jackbooted, arrogant, enjoying the torture of innocents, to shatter that false identity. The tyrants may have thought they were like God; it was idiotic to flatter them that God was like them.

Many who resisted the tyrants of our era turned nihilism inside out. In the nothingness they found inner light. Many came to call the light they found there God. The relation some gradually assumed toward this inner light, whose Source, they knew, was not themselves, was that of wordless conversation or communion. They addressed their God in conversation, under the name of Truth. In the twentieth century, prisons and torture chambers have often been better places to encounter God than universities.

Until recently, then, modernity was mistaken in its relation to truth, and thus to God and

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humankind. But even so modernity has, to its great credit, by grant of Providence, made three great institutional discoveries. Modern thinkers first worked out, as neither the ancients nor the medievals had, the practical principles of the three-fold free society: free in its polity, free in its economy, and free in the realm of conscience and inquiry. The great modern achievements in these matters have been supremely practical: How to make free institutions work at least tolerably well, and better in most ways than earlier regimes.

However, despite these happy practical gains, modernity tore down the only philosophical foundations that can sustain the free society. The Age of Enlightenment was supposed to do away with Sectarian bickering, but it did not. If you stay within your own school of thought, the foundations of the free society may seem secure. Peek outside, however, and you will hear raucous voices shouting. The Age of Enlightenment has failed to secure a mode of public moral argument worthy of the institutions it has erected.

Lest we forget: The twentieth century has been not only the bloodiest but also the most ideological of centuries. Ideology is the atheist's substitute for faith, and, lacking faith, our age did not want for warring ideologies. For nine decades of this century, armies not exactly ignorant clashed by night. Beneath the fearful din, two great practical principles of the free society were mortally contested: first, the *political* principle; second, the *economic* principle.

Despite the slogans of the 1930s ("the End of an Era," "the Decline of the West") and despite the boasts of dictators ("In three weeks England will have her neck wrung like a chicken"), decadent democracies proved they had the will, the audacity, and the stamina to defeat the principle of dictatorship. They defeated it so decisively that today hardly a dictator anywhere—too many, unfortunately, remain—dares to argue that dictatorship is an ideal form of government. Most are left to argue limply that, in the

particular case of their own countries, dictatorship is expedient. They lie.

Even for desperately poor people, the principles of democracy (the rule of law, limited government, checks and balances) are better than dictatorship. Only thus can people enjoy the zone of civil liberty necessary to ensure their dignity and self-command. Democracy is the world's first great practical lesson of our time, learned at fearful cost.

The second great practical lesson of our century is the futility of socialism as an *economic* principle. For 150 years, the battle over fundamental economic principles was conducted asymmetrically. Hundreds of books detailed the wonders of socialism as an ideology, passionately dissected the flaws of capitalist practice, and boastfully mapped out the coming transition from capitalism to socialism. Not one single book existed—when the time finally came—to map out the one necessary transition, from socialism to capitalism. I doubt whether ever in history were so many intellectuals wrong on a matter to which they themselves assigned highest moment, all the while thinking of themselves as "scientific" and disinterested. The story of how this happened must one day be recounted.

As Pope John Paul II pointed out in *Centesimus Annus*, this story is connected to the intellectual's devaluation of the human person. No system that devalues the initiative and creativity of every woman and every man, made in the image of their Creator, is fit for human habitation. On the first day that the flag of Russia snapped against the blue sky over the city hall of St. Petersburg, where for seven decades the Red flag had flown, a Russian artist told me: "The next time you want to try an experiment like socialism, try it out on animals first—men it hurts too much."

Indeed, once the Iron Curtain was joyfully torn down, and the Great Lie thoroughly unmasked, it became clear that in the heartland of "real existing socialism" the poor were living in Third World conditions; that a large majority of the

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population was in misery; that both the will to work and economic creativity had been suffocated; that economic intelligence had been blinded by the absurd necessity to set arbitrarily the prices of some tens of millions of commodities and services; that the omnivorous State had almost wholly swallowed civil society; that the society of "comrades" had in fact driven an untold number of people into the most thoroughly privatized, untrusting, and alienated inner isolation on earth; that this Culture of the Lie had been hated by scores of millions; and that the soils of vast stretches of the land and the waters of rivers and lakes had been despoiled.

Three great lessons have been learned from our century, then, even if the cost of learning them was fearful beyond measure. First, *truth matters*. Second, for all its manifest faults, even absurdities, democracy is better for the protection of individuals and minorities than dictatorship. Third, for all its deficiencies, even gaping inadequacies, capitalism is better for the poor than either of its two great rivals, socialism and the traditional Third World economy. Just watch in which direction the poor of the world invariably migrate. The poor—of whom my family in living memory was one—know better than the intellectuals. They seek opportunity and liberty. They seek systems that allow them to be economically creative, as God made them to be.

From these three lessons, one might derive reasons for hope: Quite possibly—if along that great plain that runs like an arrow eastward from Germany through Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Russian steppes, the new experiments in democracy and capitalism succeed—the twenty-first century could be the most prosperous and free in the history of the world. Perhaps China, too, if it becomes a democracy under the rule of law as it is already becoming capitalist, will bring to its more than one billion citizens unprecedented liberty. And throughout Latin America, there is a chance that the fertile soil of liberty will yield new fruits of education, creative energy, and prosperity for all.

Indeed, the twenty-first century could be the single most creative century in history, bringing

virtually all the peoples of the world under the cool and healthful shade of liberty. It could be lovely.

Far likelier, however, is the prospect that the twenty-first century will be like the twentieth: tormented, sanguinary, barbarous. For there is still, alas, a fourth lesson.

During the twentieth century, the free society was fighting for its life. The urgent need to secure the free polity and the free economy blinded most to the *cultural* peril into which liberty has rapidly been falling.

Many sophisticated people love to say that they are clinical, that ours is a cynical age. They flatter themselves: They do not believe nothing; they believe anything. Ours is not an age of unbelief. It is an age of arrogant gullibility. Think how many actually believed the romances of fascism and communism. Think how many, today, believe in Global Warming; think how many believe in a coming Ice Age—and think how many believe in both! One thing our intellectual betters never lack is passionate belief.

One principle that today's intellectuals most passionately disseminate is vulgar relativism, "nihilism with a happy face." For them, it is certain that there is no truth, only opinion: my opinion, your opinion. They abandon the defense of intellect. There being no purchase of intellect upon reality, nothing else is left but preference, and will is everything. They retreat to the romance of will.

But this is to give to Mussolini and Hitler, posthumously and casually, what they could not vindicate by the most willful force of arms. It is to miss the first great lesson rescued from the ashes of World War II: Those who surrender the domain of intellect make straight the road of fascism. Totalitarianism, as Mussolini defined it, is *la feroce volantá*. It is the will-to-power, unchecked by any regard for truth. To surrender the claims of truth upon humans is to surrender Earth to thugs. It is to make a mockery of those

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who endured agonies for truth at the hands of torturers.

Vulgar relativism is an invisible gas, odorless, deadly, that is now polluting every free society on earth. It is a gas that attacks the central nervous system of moral striving. The most perilous threat to the free society today is, therefore, neither political nor economic. It is the poisonous, corrupting culture of relativism.

Freedom cannot grow—it cannot even survive—in every atmosphere or clime. In the wearying journey of human history, free societies have been astonishingly rare. The ecology of liberty is more fragile than the biosphere of Earth. Freedom needs clean and healthful habits, sound families, common decencies, and the unafraid respect of one human for another. Freedom needs entire rainforests of little acts of virtue, tangled loyalties, fierce loves, undying commitments. Freedom needs particular institutions and these, in turn, need peoples of particular habits of the heart.

Consider this. There are two types of liberty: one precritical, emotive, whimsical, proper to children; the other critical, sober, deliberate, responsible, proper to adults. Alexis de Tocqueville called attention to this alternative early in *Democracy in America*, and at Cambridge Lord Acton put it this way: Liberty is not the freedom to do what you wish; it is the freedom to do what you ought. Human beings are the only creatures on earth that do not blindly obey the laws of their nature, by instinct, but are free to choose to obey them with a loving will. Only humans enjoy the liberty to do—or not to do—what we ought to do.

It is this second kind of liberty—critical, adult liberty—that lies at the living core of the free society. It is the liberty of self-command, a mastery over one's own passions, bigotry, ignorance, and self-deceit. It is the liberty of self-government in one's own personal life. For how, James Madison once asked, can a people incapable of self-government in private life prove capable of it in public? If they cannot practice self-government over their private

passions, how will they practice it over the institutions of the Republic?

There cannot be a free society among citizens who habitually lie, who malingers, who cheat, who do not meet their responsibilities, who cannot be counted on, who shirk difficulties, who flout the law—or who prefer to live as serfs or slaves, content in their dependency, so long as they are fed and entertained.

Freedom requires the exercise of conscience; it requires the practice of those virtues that, as Winston Churchill noted in his wartime speeches to the Commons, have long been practiced in these Isles: dutiful stout arms, ready hearts, courage, courtesy, ingenuity, respect for individual choice, a patient regard for hearing evidence on both sides of the story.

During the past hundred years, the question for those who loved liberty was whether, relying on the virtues of our peoples, we could survive powerful assaults from without (as, in the Battle of Britain, this city nobly did). During the next hundred years, the question for those who love liberty is whether we can survive the most insidious and duplicitous attacks from within, from those who undermine the virtues of our people, doing in advance the work of the Father of Lies. "There is no such thing as truth," they teach even the little ones. "Truth is bondage. Believe what seems right to you. There are as many truths as there are individuals. Follow your feelings. Do as you please. Get in touch with yourself. Do what feels comfortable." Those who speak in this way prepare the jails of the twenty-first century. They do the work of tyrants.

You are, no doubt, familiar with the objection to this warning. Its central argument goes like this: to accept the idea of moral truth is to accept authoritarian control. But between moral relativism and political control there is a third alternative, well known to the common sense of the English-speaking peoples. It is called self-control. We do not want a government that coerces the free consciences of individuals; on the contrary, we want self-governing individuals

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to restrain immoral government. We want *self-government*, *self-command*, *self-control*.

If a people composed of 100 million citizens is guarded by 100 million inner policemen—that is, by 100 million self-governing consciences—then the number of policemen on its streets may be few. For a society without inner policemen, on the other hand, there aren't enough policemen in the world to make society civil. Self-control is not authoritarianism but rather the alternative to it.

“**T**he Revolution,” Charles Péguy once wrote, “is moral, or not at all.” This is also the law for the free society. It will deepen its moral culture—or it will die. As human lungs need air, so does liberty need virtue. The deepest and most vital struggles of the twenty-first century will be cultural arguments over the sorts of habits necessary to the preservation of liberty. What are the habits we must teach our young? Which are the habits we must encourage in ourselves, and which discourage? To allow liberty to survive—and, more than that, to make it worth all the blood and tears expended to achieve it—how do we need to live?

With the ample wealth produced by a free economy, with private liberties bestowed abundantly by free polities, are we not now ashamed of the culture we have wrought, its shocking crimes, its loss of virtue, its loss of courtesy, the decline of common decency? Can all the sufferings of our ancestors on behalf of liberty have been endured for this—that we might be as we now are?

Nihilism builds no cities. Great cultures are built by vaulting aspiration—by the Eros of truth and love and justice and realism that flung into the sky such arches as this Abbey's.

We must learn again how to teach the virtues of the noble Greeks and Romans, the commandments God entrusted to the Hebrews, and the virtues that Jesus introduced into the world—even into secular consciences—such as gentleness, kindness, compassion, and the

equality of all in our Father's love. We must celebrate again the heroes, great and humble, who have for centuries exemplified the virtues proper to our individual peoples. We must learn again how to speak of virtue, character, and nobility of soul.

Liberty itself requires unprecedented virtues, rarely seen in simpler and more simply led societies. Special virtues are needed by self-governing peoples: calm, deliberate, dispassionate reflection; careful, responsible, consequence-accepting choice. In self-government, citizens are sovereigns, and must learn to exercise the virtues of sovereigns.

The free economy, too, demands more virtues than socialist or traditional economies: It demands active persons, self-starters, women and men of enterprise and risk. It requires the willingness to sacrifice present pleasures for rewards that will be enjoyed primarily by future generations. It requires vision, discovery, invention. Its dynamism is human creativity endowed in us by our Creator, Who made us in His image.

And so, too, the pluralist society calls for higher levels of civility, tolerance, and reasoned public argument than citizens in simpler times ever needed.

To maintain free societies in any of their three parts—economic, political, or cultural—is a constant struggle. Of these three, the cultural struggle, long neglected, is the one on whose outcome the fate of free societies in the twenty-first century will most depend. We will have to learn, once again, how to think about such matters, and how to argue about them publicly, with civility, and also with the moral seriousness of those who know that the survival of liberty depends upon the outcome. The free society is moral, or not at all.

No one ever promised us that free societies will endure forever. Indeed, a cold view of history shows that submission to tyranny is the more frequent condition of the human race, and that free societies have been few in number

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and not often long-lived. Free societies such as our own, which have arisen rather late in the long evolution of the human race, may pass across the darkness of time like splendid little comets, burn into ashes, disappear.

Yet nothing in the entire universe, vast as it is, is as beautiful as the human person. The human

person alone is shaped to the image of God. This God loves humans with a love most powerful. It is this God who draws us, erect and free, toward Himself, this God Who, in Dante's words, is "the Love that moves the sun and all the stars." FT