

A Plea for Intolerance

by Venerable Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen

America, it is said, is suffering from intolerance. It is not. It is suffering from tolerance: tolerance of right and wrong, truth and error, virtue and evil, Christ and chaos. Our country is not nearly so much overrun with the bigoted as it is overrun with the broadminded. The man who can make up his mind in an orderly way, as a man might make up his bed, is called a bigot; but a man who cannot make up his mind is called tolerant and broadminded. A bigoted man is one who refuses to accept a reason for anything; a broadminded man is one who will accept anything for a reason, provided it is not a good reason. It is true that there is a demand for precision, exactness, and definiteness, but it is only for precision in scientific measurement, not in logic. The breakdown that has produced this unnatural broadmindedness is mental, not moral. The evidence for this statement is threefold: the tendency to settle issues not by arguments but by words, the unqualified willingness to accept the authority of anyone on the subject of religion, and, lastly, the love of novelty.

Religion is not an open question. It has its principles, natural and revealed, which are more exacting in their logic than mathematics. But the false notion of tolerance has obscured this fact from the eyes of many who are as intolerant about the smallest details of life as they are tolerant about their relations to God. In the ordinary affairs of life, these same people would never summon a Christian Science practitioner to fix a broken windowpane; they would never call in an optician because they had broken the eye of a needle. And yet for the all-important subject of religion, on which our eternal destinies hinge, on the all-important question of the relations of man to his environment and to his God, they are willing to listen to anyone who calls himself a prophet. And so our journals are filled with articles for these "broadminded" people, in which everyone from Jack Dempsey to the chief cook of the Ritz Carlton tells about his idea of God and his view of religion. These same individuals, who would become exasperated if their child played with a wrongly colored lollipop, would not become the least bit worried if the child grew up without ever having heard the name of God.

The nature of certain things is fixed, and none more so than the nature of truth. Truth may be contradicted a thousand times, but that only proves that it is strong enough to survive a thousand assaults. But for anyone to say, "Some say this, some say that, therefore there is no truth," is about as logical as it would have been for Columbus, who heard some say, "The earth is round," and other say, "The earth is flat," to conclude: "Therefore there is no earth at all."

The giggling giddiness of novelty, the sentimental restlessness of a mind unhinged, and the unnatural fear of a good dose of hard thinking, all conjoin to produce a group of sophomoric latitudinarians who think there is no difference between God as Cause and God as a "mental projection"; who equate Christ and Buddha, St. Paul and John Dewey, and then enlarge their broad-mindedness into a sweeping synthesis that says not only that one Christian sect is just as good as another, but even that one world-religion is just as good as another. The great god "Progress" is then enthroned on the altars of fashion, and as the hectic worshipers are asked, "Progress towards what?" The tolerant answer comes back, "More progress." All the while sane men are wondering how there can be progress without direction and how there can be direction without a fixed point. And because they speak of a "fixed point," they are said to be behind the times, when really they are beyond the times mentally and spiritually.

In the face of this false broad-mindedness, what the world needs is intolerance. The mass of people has kept up hard and fast distinctions between dollars and cents, battleships and cruisers, "You owe me" and "I owe you," but they seem to have lost entirely the faculty of distinguishing between the good and the bad, the right and the wrong. The best indication of this is the frequent misuse of the terms "tolerance" and "intolerance." There are some minds that believe that intolerance is always wrong, because they make "intolerance" mean hate, narrow-mindedness, and bigotry. These same minds believe that tolerance is always right because, for them, it means charity, broad-mindedness, American good nature.

What is tolerance? Tolerance is an attitude of reasoned patience towards evil, and a forbearance that restrains us from showing anger or inflicting punishment. But what is more important than the definition is the field of its

application. The important point here is this: **Tolerance applies only to persons, but never to truth. Intolerance applies only to truth, but never to persons.** Tolerance applies to the erring; intolerance to the error.

Tolerance *does not apply to truth or principles*. In regard to truth and principles we must be intolerant, and for this kind of intolerance (so badly needed in order to rouse us from sentimental gush) I make a plea. Intolerance of this kind is the foundation of all stability.... The Church, who is in constant warfare with error, made her index of forbidden books to defend the permanency of Christ's life in the souls of men.... Architects are as intolerant about sand as foundations for skyscrapers as doctors are intolerant about germs in their laboratories.

Now, if it is right — and it is right — for governments to be intolerant about the principles of government, and the bridge builder to be intolerant about the laws of stress and strain, and the physicist to be intolerant about the principles of gravitation, why should it not be the right of Christ, the right of His Church, and the right of thinking men to be intolerant of errors about the Christ, the doctrines of the Church, and the principles of reason? ...

Why, then, sneer at dogmas as intolerant? On all sides we hear it said today, "The modern world wants a religion without dogmas," which betrays how little thinking goes with that label, for he who says he wants a religion without dogmas is stating a dogma, and a dogma that is harder to justify than many dogmas of faith. A dogma is a true thought, and a religion without dogmas is a religion without thought, or a back without a backbone. All sciences have dogmas. "Washington is the capital of the United States" is a dogma of geography. "Water is composed of two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen" is a dogma of chemistry. Should we be broad-minded and say that Washington is a sea in Switzerland or that H₂O is a symbol for sulfuric acid?

It is not progress to act like mice and eat the foundations of the very roof over our heads. Intolerance about principles is the foundation of growth. So too with the dogmas of the Church, of science, and of reason; they are like bricks, solid things with which a man can build.

A dogma, then, is the necessary consequence of the intolerance of errors about first principles, and that science or that church which has the greatest amount of dogmas is the science or the church that has been doing the most thinking. The Catholic Church...has seen the centuries go by with their passing enthusiasms and momentary loyalties, making the same mistakes, falling into the same mental snares, so that she has become very patient and kind to the erring pupils, but very intolerant and severe concerning the false. She has been and she will always be intolerant so far as the rights of God are concerned; heresy, error, and untruth are not personal matters on which she may yield, but a Divine Right in which there is no yielding. She is meek towards the erring, but violent to the error. The truth is divine; the heretic is human. When due reparation is made, she will admit the heretic back into the treasury of her souls, but never the heresy into the treasury of her wisdom. Right is right if nobody is right, and wrong is wrong if everybody is wrong. And in this day and age we need, as G. K. Chesterton tells us, "not a Church that is right when the world is right, but a Church that is right when the world is wrong."

The attitude of the Church in relation to the modern world on this important question may be brought home by the story of the two women in the courtroom of Solomon [3 Kings 3:16-28]. Both of them claimed a child. The lawful mother insisted on having the whole child or nothing, for a child is like truth — it cannot be divided without ruin. The unlawful mother, on the contrary, agreed to compromise. She was willing to divide the babe, and the babe would have died of broad-mindedness.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.