

## *The Option*

We are now free to choose; in truth, we have always had this freedom but under the present circumstances – an increasingly militant secular society that is marginalizing traditional religion – we should more fully realize this precious freedom and what it might cost us.

An Orthodox Christian, Rod Dreher, has proposed the choice of what he calls the 'Benedict Option' in his book of that title. I have also come to consider this option now to be essential for our survival as Christians in present-day America. By survival I don't mean the risk of physical

extermination but a more ignominious end in sloth and indifference.

Dreher's 'Benedict Option' for those of you not familiar with it comes from his proposal, now a growing movement, that Christians must create autonomous communities and join together in living authentic Gospel-based lives. Saint Benedict, the founder of the monastic movement in the West, is the model to follow, disavowing the desires, lures and false claims of the secular world including power and wealth.

The Benedict Option is a term derived from the last paragraph of Alasdair MacIntyre's masterful work on moral philosophy, *After Virtue*, published in 1981. By that date MacIntyre had

recognized the moral vacuum Americans faced and that to preserve our values Christians and others of traditional faiths might have to choose the path into the unknown that Saint Benedict once blazed.

This is now for some of us at least a proposed new-old way of life, radical and communal; it is admittedly an extreme response to an extreme social and cultural breakdown that has only deepened since MacIntyre's cautionary warning over a generation ago.

However we ultimately assess Rod Dreher's advocacy of this radical choice we American Christians owe him a great debt for challenging us to reconsider our own 'options' as to how we are to live in the contemporary world.

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Some of us at the Dominican School in Berkeley have been discussing various alternatives, some similar to what Dreher proposes for some time. I have termed my own decision 'the desert path' with the analogy being the need to follow Moses over the Jordan into an uncertain but promising land.

To fully understand this 'option' and its serious implications – and why some of us have chosen something akin to it -- we need to examine the context of our troubled times. Few Christians doubt that we are facing a serious crisis, not just in America but around the world. We should seek positive responses to the challenges we face but I suggest that we should first try to understand the nature of this crisis.

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## *The Crisis of Identity*

Perhaps the most definitive personal aspect of the crisis that many Americans now face is the loss of a secure identity and a place in a genuine community.

There are many reasons, including historical and economic, as to why so many Americans have lost the basic relationships that once defined us, our objectives and the meaning of our lives. Such a deprivation was predicted by many of the earliest critics of the industrial revolution, urbanization and the growth of the mass society. But, whatever its roots, the current crisis demands that we now ask the most basic question, *who am I?*

For Christians and other people of faith, God must and will be central to our answer to this question. It is God who

defines us, our nature and purpose in being human. Our understanding of our God-given nature then gives us a key as to how to relate to our fellow humans. Jesus and His Mother provide the concrete and universal models.

We also learn who we are as revealed in others – some of whom are exceptional such as the saints who then force us to reconsider our self-understanding and expectations. Other people, perhaps more seemingly ordinary like us, join us in recognizing that we are severely limited. Some of us, following this path of discovery, soon realize that while we have a divine origin – or perhaps in light of that nature -- that something has often ‘gone wrong’ in our lives and relationships.

Understanding what is both special, precious and yet limited and flawed in

human nature requires some definition of the human being beyond ordinary anthropology. Where we learn best about ourselves is in community and so that's where we should start. We must seek a way of life in which we help each other to understand who we are and were meant to be.

The next aspect of the crisis is just as personal but with intractable social consequences.

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### *The Sexual Crisis*

The word 'crisis' means or at least implies the necessity of a decisive choice. In our day the 'freedom of choice' has been the mantra of those who would reject or radically change our traditional moral precepts about sexuality. But what is the

nature of this 'choice' we are being offered?

The meaning and nature of our sexuality relates to the most basic human relationships that define both marriage and family and so this will require some careful discernment beyond this exploration. However, it is clear that we are witnessing not just a rejection of traditional morality but a change in the perception of the nature of sexuality itself.

This 'paradigm shift' reflects, I suggest, the lingering attitude that 'progress' is based on empirical science that not only displaced tradition but mandated its obsolescence. The modification of sexual morality is presumably justified by an increased knowledge of biology, bio-chemistry, genetics or perhaps some



'scientific' synthesis. There is no need to provide evidence for this required transformation (for there is none) because this is a shift in attitude not objective perception. What's called 'science' in this argumentative context is merely the handmaiden of the new morality which is, in turn, a creature of desire rather than reason.

What then is meant by 'choice'? We are instructed implicitly if not forcefully that our 'choice' must be that of a personal freedom so absolute that even our notion of what constitutes a human being is a matter of personal opinion. This kind of 'choice' increasingly appears to be suspiciously like a secular dogma.

However, there is a basic contradiction between bio-determinism on the one hand and the equally prerequisite 'freedom of

choice' on the other and this conflict is too conspicuous to be long ignored -- and yet it has been. This is because again this isn't a rational much less scientific discourse. Perhaps for many Americans the strongest appeal is that of this ambiguity itself. Self-contradiction permits an acceptance of a morally neutral attitude toward all forms of sexual behavior.

As to 'choice', as Christians we must choose to live by our moral principles uncompromised by confused and contradictory notions of 'choice' or 'freedom.' What is being repressed in our day is the inescapably spiritual dimension of human sexuality that we must affirm.

Given the fundamental differences we've outlined, to preserve our own chosen way of life we must join with others who share

not just our values but our perception of reality -- and this is yet another step toward the communal Option.

### *The Historical Crisis*

Many of us believe that we have entered a new and unprecedented era in world history, long in development and as yet not fully recognized. In America this constitutes nothing less than the loss of a common culture which implies not only the loss of shared moral values, aesthetic principles and common goals but a shared evaluative language. We not only don't agree we don't know how to discuss the disagreement.

It is not difficult to substantiate this. The prevalent moral relativism, the inability to agree on even gender roles and the nature of marriage, absurdism in the arts and

laissez-faire attitudes in economics are all confirmations of an absence of shared and guiding principles. How and why this happened is another discussion. Let's just look at the consequences and one in particular – the changing concept of freedom.

We Americans are, to an unprecedented degree, now 'radically free' to choose our own values, morality and even our concept of truth. This 'leap into the unknown' might initially provide for some a certain *frisson* comparable to a moment of ecstatic liberation. However, the troubling consequences of this radical freedom, once realized, will lead many to refuse it or to deny its reality. There is a realization or at least a clear implication that we have no real commitments or obligations except those we arbitrarily choose to honor.

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Americans no longer have a common sense of morality and hence different ideas of personal obligation.

But what does this 'new freedom' mean for us now? We must first admit that this is the reality and then make personal choices as to how we are to commit (or not) to others. This is the 'freedom option' that is now unavoidable.

These assumptions will be challenged by some who live in the remaining cultural pockets where many shared values are still more or less evident, usually the more rural areas. These are usually self-designated 'conservatives.'

Another group clings to the tenet that Americans will remain bound together by

various social institutions whether politics, media, science or technology. These good people are the remnant of the 'progressives' who are ironically now the most conspicuously 'reactionary'.

We should recognize that this radical freedom also includes the personal choice to commit to a binding community such as the Church. But it is a real choice and for many no longer dictated by family, tradition or a common culture. No one can escape this new freedom. It puts us all on the spot as to whether we choose lasting obligations or not.

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### *The Option*

All of these changes, social and historical, constitute a serious challenge for any American but

particularly for Christians. Some of us, in fact, have been the most reluctant to admit these changed circumstances. There is and will remain some understandable resistance.

The objections to what appears to some to be a cult-like or defeatist movement were quick to come and Dreher acknowledges the risks. However, one should not dismiss this proposal without considering his argument closely for he addresses the objections specifically and thoughtfully.

I want to respond by proposing what I'm going to call simply 'The Option'. I am using the singular because it is

only another perspective on what I hope would remain a unified approach. The Option in essence, is what Dreher proposes in his book – a direction for Christians toward creating autonomous communities. This movement will and should have variants but share the underlying direction.

What has become clear to me in recent discussions is, first, that the Option will be received positively by many young Christians. It is almost as if they have been waiting for it!

The objections and reservations will remain primarily, and understandably, among the older generations who have life-time commitments to the present social order and in many



cases have worked valiantly to reform and improve it.

The difference in the evaluation, as I see it, is not a theological one but an appraisal of social and historical reality. Younger people have been raised, indeed, saturated in a technological society that has distorted their values and even their thought processes and some, at least a few, have become aware of this.

(This is particularly true when it comes to concerns about the natural environment; what is yet to be realized is that our thoughts, values and relationships are also part of nature.)

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The young realize more clearly than their elders that if they are to remain Christians and raise children in the moral tradition of the faith then something like the Option isn't really an option but a necessity. It is essential because only by consciously choosing a radically communal life together will they have any chance of escaping the present myopia and addictions.

My own commitment to this direction comes from my vocation as a writer and teacher in the arts. I believe that a communal Option is now essential in providing a direction for the creative arts. Almost all of the present art forms are trapped in if not subjectivity then social isolation and the sole

criteria for 'success' has become fame and money.

For me, at least, to conceive of a breakthrough in the arts –or even an advance in an art form – outside of a radical communal dimension seems futile. We will have individual geniuses, as always, but their work will only become significant in a faith-based context.

For example, concerning my own field of the media arts, I'm now convinced that media artists should concentrate on live theater. The film and electronic media are increasingly too enmeshed in technology. What is needed is the irreplaceable relationship between live human

beings. In time, the media arts can be used to implement this but for now our work should start small and communal.

As to the spirituality, the Benedictine aspect of the Option should be sustained but broadened into other versions such as the Carmelite and in time possibly even an inter-denominational spirituality – however, one beyond the present-day well-meaning but vague ecumenism.

My own personal and positive experience has been among the Dominicans who offer their venerable and vigorous intellectual foundations.

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Yet I think a Carmelite approach, for another example, might be even more relevant to our present situation.

The Carmel Option, following Saint Teresa, might offer more emphasis on the feminine, that is, 'the Woman' as a sign and symbol of the need for a more compassionate form of authority. The tradition of Saint John of the Cross might also stress the need to renew our spiritual language.

Needless to say, none of these disciplines should be rivalrous.

As with the Benedictines and Dominicans all of the various traditions recognize that the source of renewal is to be found in our origins and earliest practices.

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The Option sounds radical, and it is, but we are not proposing to invent anything. There have been communal gatherings for decades and our effort needs to connect with existing movements such as Focolare.

Communion and Liberation and others that Dreher cites and learn from their experience.

Finally, let me suggest that the founding of new communities might well be rooted in specific vocations. There is a great need for Christians willing to work with the poor, the aged and dying as well as to protect and sustain the natural environment. These essential services might provide a modest but necessary

economic foundation for a small community.

Again, I believe we should thank Rod Dreher and the others who are building the Benedict Option movement. More than gratitude, we should be inspired to be similarly as brave and creative.

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