

The Blurring of the Lines

March 2025

One of the saddest times in recent American history for me was when reality TV exploded on the scene in the 1990's and early 2000's. It was sad because most Americans thought what they were watching on television was real. Marketing geniuses had coined the phrase "reality TV" and the huge audience bought it hook, line, and sinker. They thought what they were watching was real. Their minds had



already been softened by the advent of the internet and the constant feed of social media and its tantalizing and mindless content. Overnight it seemed that great TV shows which contained actual drama, art, humor, and theater were no longer prioritized. Slipping away were the days when people went to local libraries or bookshops and spent a Saturday afternoon reading, wondering, contemplating, and exploring on their own. By turning on their new devices and programs, Americans were increasingly subdued to enjoy and imbibe "reality," which was not a reality at all.

I did not know until recently that America ranked 36th in the world in literacy. Equally surprising was to learn that countries like Ukraine, North Korea, Finland, and Uzbekistan are in the top 10 in literacy at nearly 100 percent - far above the average American's reading capability. Approximately 54 percent of American adults today read below an equivalent of a sixth-grade level. That was an astounding revelation. That means that nearly half of the adult population, or 130 million individuals in the US, struggle to comprehend what they are reading. One in five adults aged 16 to 74 read below the third-grade level. No wonder reality TV, social media, and other forms of enticing and simplistic messaging are so prevalent and appealing to Americans today. Images are more easily digested than reading a book or discerning a well-crafted drama. Very unfortunately, in recent years, Americans' ability to think independently, comprehend, and discern, has been compromised.

Recently I was talking with a representative of my bank on the phone about an email I had just received requesting updated information about "suspicious" activity on my account. The email contained the exact same logo and look of other communications I had received from our bank in the past. The representative was very glad I called because the email was false, it was a scam. The criminal sending that email was pretending he worked for my bank – when the opposite was true; but how was I to know the difference? In that moment on the phone with the representative, I even wondered if she was really a representative from my bank, or another imposter? These days, the lines of what's real and what's not are getting blurred far too often. Teachers in schools worldwide struggle to know if papers students are submitting are actually written by the student or generated by AI. Clever, beautiful influencers on the internet are selling

themselves as virtual girlfriends or boyfriends to millions of lonely subscribers through a medium now called “parasocial.” Few times in history have we needed more desperately the wisdom of God and the trustworthy counsel of the Holy Spirit to show us the way forward through these dangerous jungles of lies and deceptions which are creeping into our everyday lives.

Every year, as many of you know, I spend a week in silent retreat with Benedictine monks in Iowa. This is how I pursue my own reality check. I pray seven times a day with these wonderful friends, listening to Scripture being read, chants and songs being offered, and worship of Christ being held in highest regard. Worries, regrets, and needless voices in my head become exposed by the loving and powerful presence of Christ in the sacred silence. Every time I am in sustained prayer like this, I am reminded that the ultimate reality in our world is Christ’s kingdom, not the kingdom of our fallen but scintillating, enticing world. During my retreat in early March, I participated in an Ash Wednesday service. The monks put ashes on my forehead and reminded me of my mortality. At 69 years old now,



getting along in life, these words rang truer to me than ever before. As I approach the end of my own earthly life, anticipating and hoping to spend an eternity with my Lord, seeing things clearly and truthfully in my life and the world around me has never been more important.

In my prayers, and certainly during this current Lenten season, it is very sobering to believe in the reality and presence of Satan – a being dedicated to the destruction of my soul and yours. Jesus called Satan “a liar and father of lies” (John 8:44) because of how often he employs deception as one of his chief tactics. Satan appears truthful, but he represents evil. He can easily fool us if we are not careful. These are the reasons Jesus told his followers to trust him and not the ways of the world. Jesus called himself “the way, the truth, and the life.” (John 14:6) He wants us to stay as close to him as a sheep does to his shepherd. A shepherd protects his sheep from danger. He wants his sheep to listen only to his voice and not be deceived by others. (John 10:4) In the same way we are to listen only to Jesus’ voice and not others. For these reasons, we call Jesus the “Good Shepherd.”

One of the chief ways we fall into Satan’s trap is through the idols we make in our lives, allowing ourselves to be endlessly fascinated, dangerously preoccupied, or fully devoted to something other than God. Only God can fully settle and ground us in truth. That idol might initially appear great, such as making lots of money, accumulating increasing power, developing a skill which the world desperately needs, or being glued to or pleased by visually appealing images; however, if all these idols become dominant, they will eventually lead us to spiritual

betrayal and moral decay. For these reasons, Jesus called himself “the Logos,” which in English means “the Word,” the dwelling place where we are protected from the power of idols and grounded in his truth and reality. He wants us to be with him through simple and quiet devotion, worship, praying, and reading our Bibles. He does not want us to worship him through attractive and questionable visual images, cute phrases, or dangerous simplicities which cannot be found in Scripture. Images can easily turn into idols if we are not careful. We are to worship Jesus only “in spirit and truth.” (John 4:23)

America needs to renew its emphasis on developing basic reading skills for all its citizens. We are at a crossroads on many different fronts and quality education is one of the most important. We need strong liberal arts universities as never before, teaching students how to pursue truth and higher purposes and goals for our citizenry. Reading helps us reason independently and recognize deception when it comes our way. Relying on images primarily is a dangerous path for us to pursue because our lives can be easily manipulated by clever leaders, influencers, TV hotshots, or marketers on any given day, making true reality harder to find. On the other hand, if we are grounded in “the Word,” reading Scripture for ourselves, praying often in silence, our souls will be guided and counseled by the Spirit of Truth.

If you have not thought a lot about Satan recently, now might be a good time to consider taking him more seriously before you or I go down additional paths of deception and peril. It is what the Lenten period in preparation for Easter asks us to do – reflect, read, discern, pray and worship more often. “Be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10) By doing so, we will discover what is real and what is not. And the lines that are often blurred will become clearer. Join me during this special time of year and encounter the Logos.

