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Thank you for welcoming me to Australia. I wish I were here with good news. Actually, I believe I do have good news. I am not optimistic, but I am hopeful. Hope, as I will explain, is not the same thing as optimism. To find our way to hope, we first have to be painfully honest about the bad news.

These are not normal times. We in the West are in the worst spiritual and social crisis since the collapse of the Roman Empire. We don't see this collapse clearly because it is hidden by our wealth. But make no mistake: the fundamental pillars of Western civilization are crumbling – none more consequentially than the Church.

Our crisis is actually a combination of crises.

It is a crisis of MEANING. In the postmodern West, we have arrived at a place where many people no longer believe that meaning exists at all, and that we can know it.

The modern historian Yuval Noah Harari says that the modern world can be characterized by a simple transaction: people have exchanged MEANING for POWER. That is, to gain the right to do whatever we desire with our bodies and with nature, we surrender the idea that objective meaning exists. We are free to do as we like, but the cost of that freedom is de facto nihilism.

Closely related to that, it is also a crisis of TRUTH. We have lost the ability to determine what is true or false. We can no longer agree on a narrative that allows us to reason together. This is one reason why we cannot resolve our conflicts. A few days ago, Twitter blocked scientist Ray Blanchard, one of the world's eminent experts in the field of sex, gender, and biology. Why? He stated on Twitter that gender dysphoria is a mental disorder. This is a fact, according to the DSM, which is the official rule book of the medical profession. It is a fact that does not suit the fanatical gender ideologists, so Dr. Blanchard was booted from the social media platform for making a scientifically correct – but politically incorrect – statement. He was later reinstated after protest, but this sort of thing is going to become ever more common. Lacking a shared authoritative framework within which we can reason together to determine what is true and false, our deliberations become nothing more than exercises in power.

It is also a crisis of FRAGMENTATION. In our time, people have lost a sense of unity and purpose. We no longer feel that we are part of a wider community. Radical individualism is the new normal. The old bonds of family and community have mostly dissolved. It is no longer surprising news that we in America don't know our neighbors. What is surprising is that our neighbors can sometimes be working against us. A friend of mine is a lovely woman, but quite liberal. She teaches high school in a small town in the South – deep Trump country. She told me about a year ago that things are getting better and better. Why's that? I asked.

“We have more and more gay couples in the school,” she said. “And more kids are coming out as transgender.”

I asked her how that played in her small, conservative town. She laughed. "These parents have no clue what their kids are into," she said. My friend added that she had put in an offer to serve as the faculty adviser to the LGBT club, if students should start one.

Stories like this are playing out all over America. I could give you a thousand examples of fragmentation, but that one sticks in my mind, for a couple of reasons. The town where this takes place is in the most conservative part of the US. This is the place to where people like to think they can run to escape the decadence. The local school – the main institution in the town, the one that holds the local society together – has taken it upon itself to identify and exacerbate the break between the parents' values and their children's, on the matter of sexual orientation and gender identity. What's more, the parents are so disconnected from the lives of their children – who are being catechized not by church or family, but by social media and popular culture -- that they aren't aware of the deep crises of identity these kids are having.

This crisis of IDENTITY is both individual and societal. We have cut ourselves off from God, from our past, from family, from our places, and from any traditional sources of the Self. We don't know who we are, but we are firmly convinced that we must be Self-chosen. Today, in the name of freedom and autonomy, we even deny our biology as males and females.

All of these crises are manifestations of what one critic has called "liquid modernity." This critic, the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, says that the modern condition is one in which everything changes so quickly that it becomes impossible to find stability. The one who thrives in liquid modernity is the one who has no relationships and no commitments. Modern man is not a pilgrim – that is, a man who goes on a meaningful journey with others towards a certain destination – but rather a tourist, who travels wherever his whims take him.

This is nothing new. In his famous 6th-century Rule, St. Benedict of Nursia identified this kind of person as a "gyrovague," and called him "the worst kind of monk." He goes from monastery to monastery, without stability, taking what he can and then moving on. A gyrovague is lost.

The Rule of St. Benedict is a way of life that offers everything that the gyrovague refuses. It trains communities that live by the Rule to discover meaning, truth, community, wholeness, and identity. The Rule is a source of life and hope for a dark, confused world, precisely because Benedict wrote it out of his own experience of the collapse of Roman civilization. As a young Christian, he fled from the city of Rome, went to live and pray in a cave in Subiaco, and eventually emerged to found monasteries, and to write his Rule.

The Rule is a deceptively simple text. It is a guide for living in a monastery, which the saint called "a school for the Lord's service." The Rule structures the monk's life. It tells him when to pray and when to study, when to work and when to rest. It tells him what to eat, what to wear, and how to relate to others within the monastic community. The rules exist to make it possible for the monks to live together in peace, and to make progress in their lifelong journey towards unity with Jesus Christ. Theirs is a life of constant conversion, though both prayer and work.

When he died in the year 547, there were only a few Benedictine monasteries. But over the next centuries, the movement grew. Historians credit the Benedictines with laying the groundwork for the rebirth of civilization in the West.

How did they do it? Benedict was a Christian who sought a way to serve God in community, amid a world where all certainties and all moral structures were in collapse. The early Benedictine

monks did NOT seek to save civilization. They did NOT want to “Make Rome Great Again.” They only wanted to put the search for God first, and to order everything else from that.

To find God, they established a way of life that consecrated everything to His service. Prayer, work, study, worship, eating, living together – all of it was ordered by the Rule, to keep the members of the community always on an inner pilgrimage to unity with God. As I said, theirs was a life of constant conversion.

The fruits of that conversion were shared throughout Western Europe over the next centuries. The monks did not stay only inside their monasteries, but rather they became a blessing to all the people around them. They taught them how to

pray, most of all, but they also taught them how to cultivate gardens, how to build things, and how to do all kinds of things that people forgot after Rome’s collapse. And within the monastery libraries the monks preserved the cultural memory of Greco-Roman civilization.

I believe that today, we Christians who live in the world have a lot to learn from the Rule of St. Benedict, and the historical example of the Benedictine monks and nuns. What I call the “Benedict Option” is the choice all Christians must make if we want to hold on to our faith in this Age of Darkness. Christians today must understand ourselves as exiles, and develop ways of living that keep the faith alive through this long trial the Church is now enduring.

Let me emphasize this again: We are not monks. We are called to live IN the world. But if we are going to live faithfully in the world, then we must spend far more time and effort away from the world, in prayer, study, fasting, and other things to root the faith deep in our hearts. Our spirituality must become more disciplined, and yes, more monastic. We have to learn more, but more than mastering information, we have to work always to keep our hearts open to purification by the Holy Spirit. Our entire lives must become a liturgy, forming us as disciples.

Because our calling is to live in the world, we must always offer the Gospel, in word and in deed, to the world. But today, we Christians are weak in faith, and we cannot give to the world what we do not have. A great contemporary historian of the early Church, Robert Louis Wilken, has said that the crisis of the

Church today is so grave that she must first re-convince her own people of the Christian story before she tries to convince the world.

This is a radical statement, but it’s true. If you look at the social science research on the religious belief and engagement of young people in America, you will find plenty of reason to panic. The crisis is general, but it’s the worst in Catholics. These facts are confirmed anecdotally by my travels to Catholic and Evangelical universities around the US. When invited to give speeches there, I usually find the time to ask faculty members and campus ministers about the faith life of the students. At almost every single college, they tell me that the students arrive on campus knowing next to nothing about their faith – and they don’t even know what they don’t know! Professors do what they can, but four years is not remotely enough time to compensate for something the kids never received from their parents, their parish, or their Christian schooling.

Christianity as a meaningful force in Western civilization is dissolving right in front of our eyes. If you wish to surrender, then you don’t have to do a thing. Sit still and wait for the end. Nobody is coming to save you and your family.

But if you wish to fight, then I have good news for you. The fight is not going to be like anything we've been through before. In this culture war, it's not going to be straightforward – the enemy has us outnumbered and outgunned – but more like underground resistance in occupied territory. And, it's going to be complicated. People may want to fight, but in certain circumstances, the more important thing might be to stand firm.

Let me speak more concretely about this.

Three years ago, before I wrote the book, I visited the monastery of Norcia, in central Italy. This is the Benedictine monastery that's in the hometown of Saint Benedict himself. Napoleon closed it and dispersed its monks in the early 19th century, but 200 years later, a handful of American monks – traditional Catholics -- returned and resurrected Benedictine religious life in the town. I based Chapter 3 in *THE BENEDICT OPTION* around the experiences of that community.

Anyway, on that first visit, I talked to Father Cassian Folsom, who at that time was the prior. He told me that any Christian family who wanted to survive these dark times with their faith intact must embrace some form of the Benedict Option.

Father Cassian told me to go over the mountains from Norcia, to a city on the coast called San Benedetto del Tronto. There I should meet a man named Marco Sermarini, the leader of a group of about 20 Catholic families who call themselves the Tipi Loschi, a name associated with the Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati. Said Father Cassian, "These Catholics are living out the Benedict Option. Go see for yourself."

Father Cassian was right. The Tipi Loschi are the best example of the Benedict Option that I have ever seen. They all live in their own apartments in the city, work in normal jobs, and attend normal parishes on Sunday. But they have a

strong sense of community. They started their own school, the Scuola G.K. Chesterton. They have a clubhouse, Santa Lucia, where they gather for communal prayers, for the mass, for Bible study, for feasting, for gardening together, for pilgrimages, and for playing sports. They serve the poor and create opportunities for others outside their community who need help.

Marco Sermarini told me that he and his friends started the group in the 1990s, after they finished university. They were dissatisfied with the minimalist Catholicism that is common in Italy, he said. They wanted something more. They went very deep into the traditions of the Church, seeking to be formed as authentic Catholics. They completely embrace the Church's Magisterium.

Marco said, "We invented nothing. We only re-discovered the treasures that were put away in an old box, and hidden from us. We had forgotten."

Some critics say that the Benedict Option advises Christians to run to the mountains, and to build walls to keep the world out. It's not true – and the Tipi Loschi prove it. They have built communal structures – habits and disciplines -- in which they can nurture their faith, so that when they encounter the world, they can bring Christ to it. As Marco's wife Federica says, "We can be open to the world without fear because we know who we are."

Other critics say that the Benedict Option is about fear and anger at the modern world. If that's what you think, go visit the Tipi Loschi. Living out Catholicism together is the focus of their life –

and they are the most joy-filled Christians I know. They offer us all a beautiful way to live, in the splendor of truth and love.

More and more Christians are waking up to the seriousness of this civilizational crisis, and are looking for hope amid a never-ending stream of bad news. In Rome last autumn, I was shocked and gratified to hear an endorsement of The Benedict Option from someone at the very top of the Catholic Church.

Archbishop Georg Gänswein is prefect of the papal household, and the longtime personal secretary to Pope Benedict XVI. At a conference in Rome, Monsignor Gänswein spoke about the state of the Church terms that were openly apocalyptic.

He said that reading “The Benedict Option” was for him a source of consolation and inspiration for him. Why? Because it draws on the deep wisdom and experience of the Church to offer all of us a way out.

I shouldn't have been surprised that a faithful servant of Benedict XVI loves “The Benedict Option.” As a younger priest, Father Joseph Ratzinger saw this catastrophe coming. In a 1969 speech broadcast on German radio, Father Ratzinger said that the Church was already in crisis. He said that in the years to come, the Church would lose many of its people, lose its wealth, and lose its power. The Church would be reduced to a small number of true believers, who want Christ more than anything else, and who live differently because they see more deeply. These true believers will be a light in the darkness, and the seeds of true renewal, said the future Benedict XVI.

How will these Christians do it? By committing themselves more completely to the disciplines of the traditional Christian life. The social science research is very clear: If you are not fully committed to Christianity, then you – or at least your children – will almost certainly end up atheist. There can be no compromise.

Let me share something even more sobering with you, something I learned last week traveling in Slovakia. As some of you may know, my next book is going to be about what I regard as the “soft totalitarianism” fast emerging in our society, from the progressive left. My book will examine what lessons in resistance that we in Western liberal democracies have to learn from the experiences of faithful Christians and other dissidents who endured the hard totalitarianism of Soviet bloc rule. I was in Slovakia last week doing interviews with members of the underground Catholic Church, who kept both the faith and political community alive under the communist yoke.

I learned that the key figure in all this was Tomislav Kolakovic, a Jesuit who, in 1943, saw communism coming on the horizon. He knew that after the war, the communists would control Czechoslovakia. So he began to work among the people – especially the young – to prepare them for resistance. They met in circles to study Scripture and church teaching, as well as other things – and, of course, to pray together. He organized them into independent cells, with a hierarchical leadership, so that if some of them were arrested by the secret police and tortured, they would not have the information to betray their fellow Christians. When the Iron Curtain fell across their country's borders, the Slovak Catholics were ready for it. The anti-communist resistance in Slovakia simply WAS the Catholic Church.

To be clear, Fr Kolakovic's movement – he called it the Family – was in no way opposed to the institutional church. Rather, it was a way of living out the faith, and preserving the faith, during a

time in which the institutions and their leaders had been compromised for one or more reasons. In parishes, and in normal church structures, it would have been impossible to train young Catholics as Kolakovic and his disciples did. But that training had to happen, if the Church was to survive the Dark Age that Father Kolakovic saw on the horizon.

I strongly believe that God is speaking to the world through the example of the priests, religious, and lay people of the former underground church. That's why I'm writing the book I'm working on now. And I strongly believe God is speaking to the world through the monks of Norcia. That's why I wrote THE BENEDICT OPTION. But the Norcia monks became a source of hope for me in a way I did not foresee when I started writing my book in early 2016.

In the summer of that year, when the first earthquakes began to strike the region around Norcia, cracks appeared in the walls of the monastery and basilica. The monks saw these as warning signs – as prophetic handwriting on the wall, to recall the famous story from the Book of Daniel. They moved into tents just outside the walls of the town. That is why the monks were not inside the basilica at morning prayer on October 30, when the big earthquake struck, and caused the basilica to collapse completely.

The monks survived. Now they are living in a new monastery on the side of the mountain overlooking Norcia. They view the ruins of the basilica as a symbol of the Church in the modern world – and they are committed to rebuilding it.

One of the Norcia monks told me that the earthquake was a gift to his community. It made them realize how radically they needed God. How strange and wonderful it is to visit a community of men who have lost almost everything, and who have a very hard road to recovery – but who are filled with light, with joy, and above all, with HOPE.

The monk's resilience after the earthquake reminds me of a line by the Jewish psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, who survived the Nazi death camps. He wrote, "Those who have a 'why' to live can bear with almost any 'how.'" Reading the prison memoirs of Dr. Silvester Krcmery, a faithful Slovak Catholic who was jailed and tortured for his faith, I have seen the truth of this statement again. Dr. Krcmery gave thanks for his prison experience, because it brought him so much closer to God, and gave him great opportunities to serve the Lord and others.

None of us want to go to prison for our faith, because we are hated by society. But we know, we MUST know, that this is possible. None of us want to lose our jobs because of our religious and moral convictions, but we must know that this is increasingly likely. None of us want to be pushed to the margins of society, and to be thought of as what Hillary Clinton denounced as "deplorables." But we must not be so foolish as to assure ourselves that that can't happen here.

Here's the reason for hope. If we choose God above everything else, we can live through anything. Even our suffering becomes an opportunity to glorify God, and share in Christ's suffering. "Bless you, prison," said Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the most famous political prisoner of the 20th century. He blessed prison because the clarity of persecution showed him what truth is, what man is, and brought him to God.

So, again, if we put the search for God, and our service to Him, above everything else, we can not only endure, but triumph. But in this hostile post-Christian civilization, if we fail to put God first, then we will lose Him, and everything else that truly matters. The choice is ours. This is the Option part of the Benedict Option. Taking that option, as I write in the book, means to live our entire lives as ordered to Christ in a spiritual disciplined way. We have to push back against the

post-Christian world as hard as it pushes against us. If you are content to live as an ordinary middle-class Christian, sooner or later you – or at least your children – will not be living as Christians at all.

The things we hunger for today – truth, meaning, purpose, identity, and community – they are all found in Christ, and in authentic Christian community. As a people, we used to know these things. We have forgotten. As the Tipi Loschi community found, the Church and its traditions are a road map leading us out of darkness. They are waiting to be re-discovered.

Do we have the courage to turn our backs to this world, as St. Benedict did, and seek Christ where he may be found in these calamitous times? The answer must be YES – but time is passing quickly. We must decide.

From a mustard seed of faith planted in a cave in Subiaco grew a great Christian movement that saved Western civilization. It happened once; it could happen again. Only God knows, but consider this possibility: that the new and very different St. Benedict that the world needs is ... you.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

