

“Fake News” Comes in Many Forms

In recent years, we've become aware of the term “fake news.” Though described in many ways, typically it refers to sensationalized stories that are biased or outright untrue.

Unfortunately, getting “the straight story” is harder than ever these days. Everyone has an opinion on social media; the Big Tech companies are setting themselves up as arbiters of what they deem to be fake news and censoring people and organizations; and many news sites slant either to the right or left. On top of this, there's a lot of misinformation out there about the Catholic faith. Add to this misinformation about ourselves that we can use to develop a poor self image, or that results in us dealing with gossip. So, what are we to do?

Last week in the first reading from Deuteronomy, as Moses is aware that his time on earth is coming to an end, he gives a farewell of sorts. Among his words are an allusion to the future coming of Jesus as a prophet who will sound human but be much more. Moses however also warns of false prophets that the people have to be aware of.

“Fake news” is certainly no new phenomenon. So how to combat it?

With respect to that, I'd like to focus more on the kind of “fake news” that impacts us as people, and with what is out there on our Church.

For our Church, it's important to know the source. For instance, there are organizations and websites that are extremely liberal or conservative; they can have some good information, but be aware of how they are reporting something the pope or bishops say. If it's not an opinion piece, but presented as news, and they are attacking a bishop, the pope or former pope, it's a major red flag. With printed materials, it's a little bit easier; an “imprimatur,” note is often in the front page or two noting that a bishop or Church authority has found it acceptable for publication and not contrary to the Catholic faith. (Now of course there are many good books out there too that do not have this, but it does help). You might want to read up on the author too; look up their biography and their story. Many clergy and lay people have websites, but you might find they are posting stories or writing with a particular slant. And, unfortunately, there are also many websites that attack the Catholic faith too. That's why we need to do our homework and educate ourselves about the truth of what the Catholic Church teaches; so make use of some solid websites like EWTN.com, catholic.com, usccb.org, just to name a few.

How about though the false prophets who have impacted us? Here I'm thinking outside of the box. But perhaps you have been impacted by a parent who should have been more loving, or a verbally abusive relationship, or cruel person who has slandered you. Some people have been hurt deeply through words and gossip. If that has impacted you, acknowledge rather than bury that truth. Keep reminding yourself of how deeply God loves you. Of how we are created in God's image, and that God knows us inside out. Gaze upon the Eucharist or the crucifix and be reminded that there is no end to

God's love and mercy. And, as I said last week, if you find yourself really struggling with anxiety and hurt or have deep scars that aren't healing, never hesitate to talk to someone about it more in-depth.

With that though, how do we pass on fake news? It's so easy to gossip; and sometimes it is harmless. But other times it can cause deep damage when we're in "keyboard warrior" mode online, or passing things on to people that get passed on and on. When we judge someone, do we do it to put them down or help them? Do we get the full story of someone or just form an opinion based on half-truths or what we want to hear? Can we see the good in someone, or be open to the possibility they may change for the better? When we remember that all are created in God's image we can do a better job of avoiding destroying someone's reputation.

Also, be on guard with respect to censorship. It's been very disturbing to see how big tech companies like Facebook and Twitter have been ramping this up of late. Twitter, for instance, recently froze the account of Catholic World Report - which is operated by Ignatius Press and founded by Fr. Joseph Fessio, a Jesuit priest, 30 years ago. Twitter reinstated it, but they were suspended for "hateful conduct" for their tweet about the president nominating Dr. Rachel Levine, a biological man identifying as a transgender woman. That was it. Now we as Catholics do believe in 2 genders; "male and female He created them" (Gen. 5:2). What's scary there is what's next? This is not an attack on anyone. But many times what we believe as a Church is counter-cultural; this includes defining marriage as between a man and a woman; that life begins at conception and that same-sex couples should not adopt children just to name a few. When big tech starts shutting down people for having viewpoints they disagree with and stifles debate, it's of great concern, because these mediums have become places for people to discuss and exchange ideas. Make sure to contact elected officials to express your support for a free and open forum so people can talk without fear.

Lastly, with the fake news that comes at us about people and events in the world, I think it's a good idea to do our homework. If you are conservative or liberal, you might get your news from one source. But it might be good to read multiple sources to get more information. Do some digging if you sense a story is odd.

These days, there is so much information coming at us, and often various sources present part of the truth but not the whole truth. On our part, let's be aware of what is going on in the world, both globally and nationally, but also in our own worlds with the people we know, and remember there is so much more than meets the eye and a story is much more than a sound bite.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul