

**Commencement Address for Thomas Aquinas College  
Santa Paula, California**

**May 15, 2021**

**Striving to Live a Coherent Life in an Era of Incoherence:  
Question the Secular Consensus**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki  
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois  
Adjunct Professor of Law  
Notre Dame Law School**

Reverend Fathers, faculty, staff, students, graduates and their family and friends, beloved brothers and sisters in Christ: It is good to be with you today to deliver this Commencement Address for the graduating class of Thomas Aquinas College. We give thanks for the many blessings that the Lord has bestowed upon these students over the past four years.

In my homily at this morning's Baccalaureate Mass, I spoke on the theme, "Striving to Live a Coherent Life in an Era of Incoherence." I would like to build further on that topic now in my Commencement Address with more specificity as indicated in the subtitle: Question the Secular Consensus.

Back in the 1970's when I graduated from college, it was fashionable to hear the mantra, "Question Authority." You may still see that slogan on the bumper sticker of some Baby Boomers today. There is nothing inherently wrong with questioning everything, including authority, since that is the

way we learn, from the young child who keeps asking “why?” to the Ph.D. student in philosophy who searches for the reasons for all of life’s questions. After all, Greek philosophers like Socrates and Christian scholars like Saint Thomas Aquinas based their pedagogical methodology on asking questions. But they were careful to make sure their answers comported with right reason, not just personal prerogatives, whims or fancies.

In our age and our culture today, rather than simply question authority, I think it is more crucial that we question the consensus, because while many people disrespect and disregard institutional authority these days, many of these same people are beholden to the tyrannical authority of the so-called consensus of experts, even when that supposed consensus has not actually been scientifically established.

An example would be what used to be called “global warming,” but which is now often referred to simply as “climate change,” given that the world has actually stopped warming over the past couple of decades. A helpful book in this regard is, *Why Scientists Disagree About Global Warming: The Report on Scientific Consensus of the Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change (NIPCC)*, published by The Heartland Institute in Arlington Heights, Illinois. Its authors are Craig D. Idso, Ph.D., a climatologist and

Chairman of the Center for the Study of Carbon Dioxide and Global Change; Robert M. Carter, Ph.D., a geologist and environmental scientist and author of *Climate Change: The Counter Consensus*; and S. Fred Singer, Ph.D., a physicist, Chairman of the Science and Environmental Policy Project and founder of the Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change (NIPCC).

Doctors Idso, Carter, and Singer note that politicians and “government agencies including the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) claim ‘97 percent of scientists agree’ that climate change is both man-made and dangerous.”<sup>1</sup> The authors refute the claim of “scientific consensus” about global warming. As they point out,

Science does not advance by consensus, a show of hands, or even persuasion. It advances by individual scientists proposing testable hypotheses, examining data to see if they disprove a hypothesis, and making those available to other unbiased researchers to see if any arrive at similar conclusions. Disagreement is the rule and consensus is the exception in most academic disciplines. This is because science is a process leading to ever-greater certainty, necessarily implying that what is accepted as true today will likely not be accepted as true tomorrow. Albert Einstein was absolutely right when he said, “no amount of experimentation can ever prove me right; a single experiment can prove me wrong.”

Thus, the authors conclude that the “most important fact about climate science, often overlooked, is that scientists disagree about the environmental impacts of the combustion of fossil fuels on the global climate. There is no survey or study showing ‘consensus’ on the most important scientific issues, despite frequent claims by advocates to the contrary.”<sup>2</sup>

Their conclusion is supported by a book published earlier this month entitled, *Unsettled: What Climate Science Tells Us, What It Doesn't, and Why It Matters*, by Dr. Steven Koonin, who was chief scientist of the Obama Administration's Energy Department, and now teaches as Professor at New York University, where he founded NYU's Center for Urban Science and Progress. Dr. Koonin argues that “what the media and politicians and activists say about climate science has drifted so far out of touch with the actual science as to be absurdly, demonstrably false.”<sup>3</sup>

My point here is not to enter into the debate about climate change *per se*, but to offer an example of the importance of questioning the consensus. In terms of striving to live a coherent life in an era of incoherence, we Christians find ourselves today often at odds with the current secular consensus on many issues.

The secular consensus is that if you have an unwanted pregnancy, you can go ahead and terminate it, what Pope Francis calls the “throw-away culture” and what Pope St. John Paul II had called “the culture of death.” Our Christian faith says to you: question and reject that consensus.

The secular consensus is that sex is for recreation, not procreation, so cohabiting is all right because marriage and children impinge on my freedom and pursuit of pleasure. Our Christian faith says to you: question and reject that consensus.

The secular consensus says that there is no God, but even if you do believe in a Supreme Being, religious institutions are stifling to your spiritual expression and church hierarchies are obstacles to your freedom. Our Christian faith says to you: question and reject that consensus, because Christ gave us the Church as His Mystical Body, founded on the rock of Peter and the Apostles, whose successors today are the Pope and the Bishops.

Whether you follow the secular consensus or adhere to the truth of our faith may very well depend on how you answer the question, “Are you a follower of Christ or just an admirer of Christ?” This distinction between followers of Christ and mere admirers of Our Savior is explained in a recently published book by Rod Dreher entitled, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual*

*for Christian Dissidents*. He tells the story of an artist who is painting images of Bible stories on the wall of the village church. The artist laments his own inability to paint a true representation of Christ. He says that his images comfort believers, but do not lead them to repentance and conversion. The painter says regretfully, "We create admirers. We do not create followers."<sup>4</sup>

Dreher traces this distinction between admirers of Jesus and followers of Christ to the nineteenth-century Christian existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote that

The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. He always plays it safe. Though in words, phrases, songs, he is inexhaustible about how highly he prizes Christ, he renounces nothing, will not reconstruct his life, and will not let his life express what it is he supposedly admires. Not so for the follower. No, no. The follower aspires with all his strength to be what he admires.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, as Dreher puts it, "Admirers love being associated with Jesus, but when trouble comes, they either turn on him or in some way try to put distance between themselves and the Lord. The admirer wants the comfort and advantage that comes with being a Christian, but when times change and Jesus becomes a scandal or worse, the admirer folds. . . . The follower recognizes the cost of discipleship and is willing to pay it."<sup>6</sup>

In the First Letter of the Apostle John (1 John 2:15-17), we read:

Have no love for the world,  
nor the things that the world affords.  
If anyone loves the world,  
the Father's love has no place in him,  
for nothing that the world affords  
comes from the Father.

Carnal allurements,  
enticements for the eye,  
the life of empty show –  
all these are from the world.

And the world with its seductions is passing away  
but whoever does God's will  
endures forever.

In his commentary on the gospel of John, Saint Cyril of Alexandria, Bishop and Patriarch of Alexandria in Egypt from 412 to 444, wrote:

If we have given up our worldly way of life and submitted once for all to the laws of the Spirit, it must surely be obvious to everyone that by repudiating, in a sense, our own life, and taking on the supernatural likeness of the Holy Spirit, who is united to us, our nature is transformed so that we are no longer merely men, but also sons of God, spiritual men, by reason of the share we have received in the divine nature. We are all one, therefore, in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We are one in mind and holiness, we are one through our communion in the sacred flesh of Christ, and through our sharing in the one Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

My dear graduates, as you give thanks for the blessings received over the past four years and look with hope to the bright future that God has planned for you, I encourage you to strive to live a coherent life in a world that is often incoherent. I encourage you to be courageous defenders of the truth that has been generously shared with you by the faculty of this great College. I encourage you to confidently work to promote truth and coherence in the Church and the world, with all the knowledge, wisdom, and skills you have cultivated during your time here. I encourage you to listen with great trust and respond with generosity to the vocation to which the Lord is calling you. Question the secular consensus. Be a true follower of Christ, not just an admirer from afar. Let people see your faith, your hope, and your love, not only in your words, but also in your actions and your deeds. Be one in mind and holiness, for we are one through our communion in the sacred flesh of Christ, and through our sharing in the one Holy Spirit. Be one in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Craig D. Idso, Robert M. Carter, and S. Fred Singer, *Why Scientists Disagree About Global Warming: The NIPCC Report on Scientific Consensus* (Arlington Heights, Illinois: The Heartland Institute, 2015), p. ix.

<sup>2</sup> Idso, Carter, and Singer, *Why Scientists Disagree About Global Warming*, p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> Holman W. Jenkins, Jr., "The Weekend Interview: How a Physicist Became a Climate Truth Teller," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 16, 2021, accessed online at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-a-physicist-became-a-climate-truth-teller-11618597216>.

<sup>4</sup> Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (New York City: Sentinel, 2020), p. 189.

<sup>5</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing, 1999), p. 85; quoted in Dreher, *Live Not by Lies*, p. 190.

<sup>6</sup> Dreher, *Live Not by Lies*, p. 190.

<sup>7</sup> From a commentary on the gospel of John by Saint Cyril of Alexandria, Bishop (Lib. 11, 11: PG 74, 559-562), quoted in the Office of Readings for Tuesday of the Sixth Week of Easter.