The goal of this article is to assist Catholic faculty members and other educators in developing strategies that will enable them to begin to counteract what Pope Benedict XVI has identified as the dictatorship of relativism. I explore what this social phenomenon is and how Catholic faculty members might respond to it by offering some suggestions on topics to address and by exploring potential obstacles to sound moral reasoning. Concluding with a brief consideration of the necessity of presenting the Christian faith as integral to the response to the dictatorship, I reinforce Benedict XVI’s contention that Christ is the clear alternative goal of life that can be offered to students.

INTRODUCTION

One of Pope Benedict XVI’s major concerns was a societal ethos that he called the “dictatorship of relativism.” In a June 2005 address he stated that “a particularly insidious obstacle” to education “is the massive presence in our society and culture of that relativism which, recognizing nothing as definitive, leaves as the ultimate criterion only the self with its desires.” Many Catholic social scientists, on the basis of their own experience, will agree with the Pope’s assessment, as relativism is alive and well in college classrooms, and it does pose obstacles to educating the next generation. In this article I intend to take up the Pope’s insightful claim and provide an examination of what Pope Benedict XVI means by the dictatorship of relativism—relative to both of the phrase’s principal terms—in order to determine more precisely why it is a threat and danger to society and why it needs to be countered by Catholic social scientists who teach the next generation of students. I will then explore how a social science professor might bring this understanding into the classroom, as well as discuss some serious obstacles to teaching in light of some of the causes of the social phenomenon of the dictatorship of relativism, especially with regard to the moral life.

I. THE DICTATORSHIP OF RELATIVISM

Pope Benedict XVI first used the term “dictatorship of relativism” in the homily he gave at the votive Mass for the election of a new pope on April
18, 2005, when he was still Cardinal Ratzinger, Dean of the College of Cardinals and immediate former head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.\(^3\) The main theme of the homily concerned the mercy of God, which is found in a faith that consists in the encounter and experience of friendship with the person of Jesus Christ. The phrase “dictatorship of relativism” comes roughly halfway into the homily, in reference to each individual’s calling to be mature in his faith. Contrary to attaining this maturity is remaining in a state of infancy, which means to be tossed around by what St. Paul terms “every wind of teaching arising from human trickery” (Eph 4:14). Cardinal Ratzinger equates these winds of teaching with many of today’s “isms,” including but not limited to Marxism, liberalism, agnosticism, and syncretism. This is a “relativism, which is letting oneself be tossed and ‘swept along by every wind of teaching,’ [which] looks like the only attitude (acceptable) to today’s standards. We are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.” He contrasts this with the fact that today’s standards label the mature person with a clear faith as guilty of a kind of fundamentalism.

However, it is this very friendship with Christ that allows one to discern the true from the false and deceitful, from the “trickery” against which St. Paul warns. Christ is the alternative goal to one’s egotistic desires, and He is the “measure of true humanism.” A little further on, Cardinal Ratzinger remarks that when one conforms one’s will to Christ’s then one will have true freedom and autonomy.\(^4\) Here he sets up a clear choice between two paths: to use one’s human freedom to follow one’s egotistic desires, or to follow the certain truth of human nature as fully revealed in Christ by conforming one’s will to Him so that one can achieve true freedom.

We can grasp the meaning of this relativism more fully by examining Benedict’s explanations of it in other documents. “Relativism, by indiscriminately giving value to practically everything, has made ‘experience’ all-important,” he observes. “Yet experiences, detached from any consideration of what is good or true, can lead, not to genuine freedom, but to moral or intellectual confusion, to a lowering of standards, to a loss of self-respect, and even despair.”\(^5\) Here we find specific reference to a moral relativism and its devastating consequences on the human person. If freedom is used within a culture of relativism, where everything is given the same value, an equality that “claims to assure freedom and to liberate conscience,” then, Pope Benedict asks, “What purpose has a ‘freedom’ which, disregarding truth, pursues what is false and wrong?”\(^6\) As morality is bound up with the use of one’s freedom, there must be an essential link between the truth of the human person and freedom. When promoted
“under the semblance of freedom it [relativism] becomes a prison for each one, for it separates people from one another, locking each person into his or her own ‘ego.’”

Elsewhere, Benedict states that this lack of recognition of objective truth—relativism and agnosticism—could hinder one’s moral obligation to seek truth, including religious truth. What seems essential here is that relativism, where it is assumed that no ultimate good or absolute truth exists, already favors the rejection of truth and also affects one’s motivation: if there is no absolute truth or ultimate good, then why bother seeking out the truth, which could, if discovered, have difficult implications for our behavior?

So far we have presented the meaning of relativism, but not dictatorship. The connection is not intuitively obvious. For if everyone’s desires and opinions are relatively true for each person and not true for another, then how could this relativism be dictatorial?

In his book-length interview with Peter Seewald, Pope Benedict XVI states that the logical consequence of contemporary philosophers’ view that man is incapable of truth is that there would not be any standard for ethical values; instead there would be merely one’s opinion, and a majority opinion would be the only criterion for “truth”—or, more properly, for justifying the application of this opinion in a society’s law and culture. Yet, he continues, majority opinions can be very destructive, as the cases of Marxism and Nazism illustrate. The only countermeasure to these evils is the conviction that truth exists, is attainable, and can give us the “constant values which have made mankind great.” In linking opinion with relativism and dictatorship, the pope is concerned to calm any fears of a dictatorship of truth, so he notes that there should be tolerance towards others in the sense that truth should not come to rule through violence or cruelty, but rather through its own power—with Christ’s Passion as the model.

Yet, there exists a new intolerance, coming not from those who believe and adhere to truth, but from those who hold to relative opinions which become the “well-established standards of thinking that are supposed to be imposed on everyone.” For examples, he refers to those who, in the name of not offending anyone, want to abolish the display of crucifixes in public buildings. This, he claims, destroys tolerance, because it means “that the Christian faith is no longer allowed to express itself visibly.” He also points to those who, in the name of non-discrimination, try to force the Church to change her position on homosexuality or the ordination of women. This is done under the guise of freedom and tolerance, but in fact is the imposition of a “tyrannical standard that everyone must follow.” It is an intolerant mandate of a “new religion” of reason itself, which knows all and which defines the frame of reference that applies to all. Thus, he continues, the
real threat is that “in the name of tolerance, tolerance is being abolished.” Benedict XVI sees the root of the problem in the appeal to reason, or at least what he deems “so-called Western reason.” This deformed version of reason claims total possession of society’s institutions and culture because it claims to have recognized what is right, and this new religion of reason wants to be “definitive and obligatory for all mankind” and thus becomes inimical to freedom. He applies the term “so-called” to reason, because he does not think it is a healthy form of reason, but rather a “restriction of reason to what can be known scientifically” and an “exclusion of what goes beyond it.”

It fails to open itself to metaphysical and moral truth, and ultimately to faith.

At root, the Pope is arguing that the Enlightenment’s claim that the world must have tolerance, freedom, and reason, has turned in on itself because it has restricted reason to a scientific method, closing itself to the spiritual and the transcendent. The result is a distorted understanding of the nature of reality, which, in the name of tolerance and freedom, becomes intolerance and a restriction of freedom. It becomes its own absolute justification—a false justification—and thus arises the dictatorship. With the truncation of reason, the promotion of egotistic desires and opinions, and the rejection of faith, comes all of the human trickery included in the different “isms” that are imposed on everyone as truth. And anyone who claims to adhere to truth beyond egotistic desires or scientific reasoning—such as that grounded in the metaphysical structure of human nature and creation—is considered to be a “fundamentalist.”

It must be emphasized that the rejection of faith is an essential element in the truncation of reason and the rise of the dictatorship. In his 1996 lecture, “Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today,” Ratzinger claims that faith can liberate reason, and that “reason will not be saved without faith, but [also that] the faith without reason will not be human.”

This relationship between faith and reason has several dimensions:

1. The believer, through the workings of faith by grace, can more easily grasp the nature of reality and moral truths which can in principle be known by reason; grace helps reason to be itself.

2. The acceptance of knowledge of truth is easier when one has the certitude of truth which comes from faith and a personal relationship with Christ.

3. One must have the gift of faith and believe in the truths that faith proposes in order to have certitude concerning absolute truth, including moral truths based on the goods that fulfill the human person and are not relative to each person, or to different historical times, circumstances, or cultures.
4. Faith, which provides knowledge of man as revealed in Christ, offers the full view of man, the world, and God, a view that lies beyond what is known by reason alone.

5. Reason is not abstract and is always situated within a historical context, and reason needs a historical context imbued with faith.\textsuperscript{12}

As Ratzinger says elsewhere, faith and grace purify reason.\textsuperscript{13} Ultimately, reason must be open to knowing metaphysical and moral truths—which are not strictly “scientific” or mere ego-driven desires or opinions—through authentic reason and through faith with its purifying tendency.

\textbf{II. BRINGING CONCERNS ABOUT THE DICTATORSHIP OF RELATIVISM INTO THE CLASSROOM}

In light of this dangerous social phenomenon called the dictatorship of relativism, what is the obligation of Catholic teachers? The ultimate goal should be that students will “relearn and practice” again, the “humility to recognize the truth and to accept it as a standard.”\textsuperscript{14} Those involved in education hope that the “futile and insatiable bid for novelty,” which this moral relativism creates, will be combated by a stirring in the students of the rediscovery of “the satisfying quest for goodness and truth.”\textsuperscript{15}

The professor, then, should help students realize that truth \textit{exists}, that one can possess knowledge of an objective reality that is not “constructed” by one’s will. Perhaps one way to do this is to help students see that they, at times unwittingly, make truth claims and that each person does have an inner inclination to know the truth, and as a result wants to find it—even if that inclination can be temporarily suppressed or misdirected. The fact that they are in a university classroom is evidence that they seek some knowledge that they do not yet possess.

In searching out the truth in response to the dictatorship of relativism, the teacher must address a number of associated topics such as freedom, tolerance, reason, science, conscience, virtue, culture, law and democracy, the idea of government neutrality, the natural moral law and other theories of morality such as consequentialism and utilitarianism, opinion and truth (especially moral truth), and even faith—in other words, no less than a whole view of reality. These topics can be addressed in a variety of ways, including in the form of definitional questions such as: What is freedom? What is reason? How do we know something is true? What is science and why does it and should it have such authority? Can truth be based on the authority of its source? How do you decide what is morally good and bad?

Perhaps nowhere does relativism appear more forcefully than in relation to this last question. The notion that there is an objective and common morality seems to be very difficult for students to understand and, more so,
Students tend to reject the existence of absolute moral truths, especially negative universal moral norms that apply to every person in every place, time, and circumstance. Most often, rejection comes in the form of utilitarianism or consequentialism (which is a type of moral relativism) whereby the “truth” of the goodness or badness of an action depends on the supposed good or bad consequences following upon the completion of the action. There are many ways a professor can address this moral relativism, depending on the teaching method being used and the academic discipline. In political theory, for example, Machiavelli’s “the end justifies any means” can be a great catalyst for a discussion of morality and universal moral norms, treating the nature of moral action with respect to the object, intention and circumstances, as well as the meaning of virtue.

The hesitancy of students to embrace the idea of intrinsic evils is sometimes quite striking: some female students are even unwilling to agree that rape is always morally wrong, or that female mutilation as practiced in other cultures is morally wrong for the people in those cultures. This hesitancy has led me to speculate on why arguments based on moral reasoning might not convince students (at least in the short term).

**Obstacles to Moral Reasoning**

1) A Culture of Emotional Response. The first obstacle finds its foundation in the manner in which the students are formed in the existing culture. Thus, while the professor appeals to a comprehensive notion of reason—a reason which includes metaphysical and moral truths—the culture promotes indulging in one’s emotions and passions, which diminish the ability to reason clearly. The emotions and passions are formed extensively through impressions via popular music, advertisements, television, and movies. Both the media and their content generally encourage one to follow and express one’s passions and emotions severed from control and guidance by one’s reason. Much of the current media promotes moral relativism, in addition to promoting some evil behaviors as good, and some good behaviors as bad (e.g., fornication and virginity, respectively). By portraying morally bad behaviors and lifestyles in the best possible light, and sometimes using sympathetic humor to do it, the media can psychologically manipulate viewers and listeners to express sympathy with and acceptance of the moral evil, judging it to be a good.

An example of this is the increasing acceptance of homosexual “marriage” by the U.S. population in general and younger people in particular. As more homosexual characters (acting sexually upon their same-sex attraction) are portrayed in a friendly, funny, normal manner, and homosexual couples are portrayed as functional and happier compared to dys-
functional husband-wife couples who have all the problems—and who at
times seek advice from the homosexual couples—the more “reasonable”
the idea of same-sex “marriage” becomes. As a result, this deformation
of the emotions, psyche, and reasoning with respect to the moral good is
difficult to overcome or undo with an argument from reason alone. What
once was considered to be a true judgment based on right reason (that ho-
mosexual relations are immoral) is now considered to be a false judgment
and mere irrational animus and prejudice, and therefore must be overcome
by force of law. Rather, it is the ever-increasing acceptance of same-sex
“marriage,” which rejects the true moral good of the person based on the
truth of human sexuality, that is based more on emotion (and perhaps the
goal of satisfying one’s ego-driven desires).

To be clear, emotions do play a role in the moral life, but they need
to be integrated into the operations of reason and will. As C. S. Lewis
writes in his book on the natural law, The Abolition of Man, one must have
proper responses to things, including proper emotional responses. Today,
through the help of the media and surrounding culture, students are taught
improper emotional responses, which affect the judgments that reason ren-
ders. Hence, students can end up responding emotionally and intellectu-
ally in a positive way to moral evil and in a negative way to moral good.

2) The Weakness of Human Will. The second obstacle to the effective-
ness of using moral reasoning to teach is the fact that accepting the truth
is not the same as the act of judging something to be true. For instance,
when a student is brought to truth through Socratic dialogue, and the
“revelation” occurs—what in the Platonic dialogues happens to some of
Socrates’s interlocutors—it then becomes a moment of decision, to accept
or reject the truth. Thus, accepting truth includes the will—using one’s
freedom to choose to accept the truth. It is here, I think, where much of
the problem with making the leap from relativism to objective moral truth
lies. Why? Because if the students accept moral truth, then they will have
to change their lives. The problem evokes the scene in Plato’s Gorgias,
where Socrates puts forth arguments to support the general idea that it is
better to suffer evil than commit evil. Callicles responds by exclaiming:
“By the gods, and I will. Tell me, Socrates, are you in earnest, or only in
jest? For if you are in earnest, and what you say is true, is not the whole
of human life turned upside down; and are we not doing, as would appear,
in everything the opposite of what we ought to be doing?” This remark
sums up well what the students recognize when truth confronts them: to
begin to live according to moral truths means having to let go of any way
to justify past, present, or future immoral behaviors. For example, a stu-
dent who is sexually active will favor contraception and perhaps abortion
because it is the “way out” of an “unintended” pregnancy. But if he were to grasp the truth of human sexuality and its moral purposes, and affirm it, he would have to think twice about having sex with his girlfriend—an outcome that he may not be ready to accept. In the end, students want to have that exception from the moral norm for their own circumstances, whether it is to justify a behavior or lifestyle, or to find a “solution” to some very difficult situation. As a result, students wants to fall back on moral relativism—a standard to fit how they want to live, instead of how they ought to live.\textsuperscript{21}

3) The Tyranny of Public Opinion. Another obstacle to teaching students about the dangers of relativism with reasonable arguments has to do with the tyranny of the dominant public opinion in society and on the college campus. If the reigning opinion on campus (i.e., among students, faculty and administrators) embraces certain evils as goods (or as requirements of equality or justice or rights) and is coupled with rhetoric that demonizes those who do not embrace these “goods” or “rights,” accusing such people of hatred, bigotry, prejudice, and meanness—the opposite of reasoned discussion—then students will be less likely to accept truth which could run in opposition to the public opinion. Students don’t want to be labeled mean, or hateful, or intolerant of others. In other words, peer pressure and campus public opinion can play a big role in preventing right reason from prevailing.\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{Selective Absolutism}

Even though these obstacles to the acceptance of moral truth exist, it must be noted that the professed relativism is not really relativism at all; rather it is a “selective” relativism. Indeed, students (and the culture at large) almost always do subscribe to some moral absolutes, and claim the existence of fundamental rights and goods. When I teach Aquinas’s \textit{Treatise on Law},\textsuperscript{23} a debate about natural law principles, objective morality, and moral absolutes often arises. After this debate, during which many of the students deny an objective morality and absolute moral principles and claim that morality is relative, the students are assigned the task of answering whether they think there can be an unjust law, and if so, to give an example and articulate the reasons why they think it is unjust. What should come as no surprise is that the students have no difficulty identifying laws that they think are unjust and should be changed (or proposing laws that should be passed to remedy an existing injustice). In fact, some of the claims of injustice are made in very “absolute” terms, with high degrees of moral certitude!

What this shows, and what I try to get the students to recognize, is that they do believe in some true justice or moral good that applies to everyone,
even to the point of enacting or repealing a law to attain it. Thus, it appears to be a case of “selective” relativism: Morality can be absolute and universal when there is something that the student “knows” to be immoral or unjust, and therefore everyone must accept it and needs to be active in society to change behaviors and attitudes so that the injustice can be overcome and justice made manifest. Yet, the student thinks morality is not universal, but relative, when he or she disagrees about the claim of immorality.

Thus, it seems that the decisive feature of the “dictatorship of relativism,” is not that there is no claim of truth, but rather that many of today’s claims of moral truth are based on desires and opinions instead of right reason, and these desires are then imposed on others, all in a supposed milieu of relativism, freedom, and tolerance. The problem, then, is not that people don’t believe in a morality that all others should follow; rather, they are often confused as to what the universal moral truth or good is (or they disregard it). Good is perceived as evil and evil is perceived as good.

Let us return to the case of same-sex “marriage.” In one respect, relativism exists in that proponents of same-sex marriage claim a moral equivalence between a life-long marital relationship between a man and a woman and a sexual relationship between two men or between two women. It is up to each person to choose which type of sexual relationship he or she is suited for. Yet in another respect, there exists a claim of fundamental justice for an equal right of same-sex couples to marry each other. It is so fundamental that everyone, especially the whole political community, must recognize the same-sex relationship as equivalent to a traditional marriage. When the Washington, D.C., Council was considering a law to legalize same-sex marriage, many residents protested and petitioned to have a referendum on the definition of marriage, approval of which would prevent same-sex couples from marrying. The D.C. Superior Court ruled that there could not be any vote on the matter because the D.C. Constitution guarantees the protection of human rights. Because the right to marry is a fundamental human right, the voters could not determine whether same-sex couples have that right, for no majority can vote away a human right.24

In one sense, the Court and Council are correct in that no majority can vote to take away a human right: indeed, this is the flip side of the idea that universal moral norms can never be violated. It is a point that the Church has stressed repeatedly in the post-Vatican II era: that fundamental rights can never be denied or violated by a democratic majority.25 However, the Court is incorrect in its judgment that a same-sex sexual relationship is morally equivalent to a marriage between a man and a woman. Hence, the Court also is incorrect in its judgment that same-sex couples have a fun-
damental human right to have their relationship recognized as a marriage. There is no such human right according to right reason. Thus, the Court is making a principled natural law argument regarding the fact that human rights are not to be put to a vote, but it is mistaken about what the moral good is. From the natural law perspective, its reasoning about the good (and the right) is erroneous, wrapped up in a false or distorted understanding of love and human sexuality. And it is this false understanding which is imposed upon the political community.

III. IS TEACHING ABOUT CHRIST THE ANSWER TO THE DICTATORSHIP OF RELATIVISM?

There is one more obstacle that makes moral reasoning difficult: a misunderstanding of the relationship between reason and faith. We recall that Cardinal Ratzinger pointed to Christ as the alternative to the egotistic desires and that, without faith, reason cannot fully be reason. If we are to take this claim seriously, then the exclusive use of reason/philosophy might not be enough to teach about an objective moral truth, the nature of freedom and the human person, and the understanding of reason itself. Rather, faith is needed as well, and this would seem to have ramifications for teaching.

If Christ is the exemplar of a true humanism, and truth is needed to counter the dictatorship of relativism, then are not students short-changed if Christ is not presented as an alternative for consideration? Would one, then, have to introduce the subject of Christian faith to one’s students as part of a response to their relativism? It seems that if we are to take seriously what Pope Benedict says about the roots of the dictatorship of relativism, the answer is yes. To be sure, in a Catholic university this is (or should be) expected, but perhaps it applies also in a secular university. The typical secular university appears to exclude knowledge which comes from faith; is not reason in the secular university therefore truncated, and hence, on the side of the dictatorship of relativism? Catholic social scientists should not buy into the university’s limited notion of reason, but must challenge it. They should at least offer the Christian alternative as one view among the various approaches to morality and truth.

In fact, I don’t think the Christian view is as difficult to present in a university setting as one might suppose. In my discipline of political theory, almost all of the political thinkers in the Western canon—e.g., Augustine, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Locke, Marx—treat Christianity in one way or another. Thus, there is no reason why Christianity (or, more precisely, Catholicism) cannot be addressed by today’s theorists in the classroom. How and to what extent this is done in other disciplines is left to the prudence of the professor in his or her specific social science. To take but one
example, the psychological sciences, perhaps Freud’s approach to religion can act as a catalyst for introducing Christian anthropology/psychology.

Although introducing faith to reason in the university is probably the most formidable among the challenges outlined here, it appears that the very nature of the dictatorship of relativism requires it. As Benedict XVI underscores, Christ is the clear absolute goal which can be offered to students amidst the deformation they are receiving at the hands of the culture in general and the university in particular. Catholic social scientists need to understand both the nature of this dangerous phenomenon and the obstacles to offering an effective response to it, as well as summon the courage to do what they can to counter it within their disciplines.

Notes


2. I use the term social scientist broadly, as does this journal and the Society that sponsors it, to include not only the social sciences in the strict sense but also disciplines commonly considered humanities, such as philosophy and theology. I approach the subject as a political theorist. Furthermore, I do not intend to limit the audience of this article to college-level professors; rather it is addressed to educators at all levels.


4. Ibid.


7. Cardinal Ratzinger, Pro Eligendo.


10. Ibid., 50–54.

12. Ibid.


16. The family and other communities and individuals also help form the students.


18. Although primarily referring to the indulging in and acceptance of vice as vice, one may recall Alexander Pope’s lines in relation to my point about making vice appear as a virtue: “Vice is a monster of so frightful mien, As to be hated needs but to be seen; Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face, we first endure, then pity, then embrace.”


20. Plato, Gorgias, 481.

21. This perhaps relates to the question of whether the students have the humility to search out the truth, a humility which runs counter to the pride of the assertive egotistic desires. As we recall, Benedict XVI says it is a humility which needs to be relearned and re-practiced. Reflecting on this reminds me of Plato’s dialogues in which there are different interlocutors—some of whom are open to recognizing and accepting a true account of things (e.g., Glaucon and Adeimantus in The Republic)—and others (e.g., Gorgias in the dialogue of the same name) who are closed off to it and do not want to dialogue with Socrates but want to remain in their own prideful way of life.

22. Perhaps a species of what Alexis de Tocqueville refers to as the tyranny of public opinion in Democracy in America, vol. 1, chap. 15.


26. I don’t want to equate presenting the Christian alternative with instilling faith itself in students, but nonetheless, it will at least offer the intellectual substance of the faith as something for the students to reflect upon in light of other perspectives.