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The Firmness of our Convictions

I am honored to be with you again, and for the privilege of exploring the theme of “Journalism and Convictions.”

Father François Euvé provided an excellent reflection to begin our St. Francis de Sales Days, eloquently speaking of truth as the journey, as a way and a life, because for Christians, truth is not a static thing, but a Person.

I intend to use my time to present what I see as an example of what Father Francois was outlining, or a case study for us to consider and use to reflect upon.

Earlier this month, an encounter, if you want to call it that, occurred on the National Mall in Washington DC, at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

It was probably similar to many hundreds of other encounters that happen in this large public space at the heart of the US capitol. But because of social media and the current political situation in the United States, the event became of national interest.

I don't know if it has been covered internationally. For those who are not aware of what happened, in brief:

On Jan. 18 students from an all-boys Catholic high school in Covington, Kentucky were in Washington to attend the annual March for Life, an event which draws tens of thousands of people, including busloads of Catholic young people, to protest the US Supreme Court's decision which legalized abortion in 1973.

A video from President Trump was part of the events. Some of the students were wearing red hats with the letters MAGA – Make America Great Again – on them.

That phrase, which President Donald Trump coined during his successful presidential campaign, has become a powerful symbol for both sides of the US political landscape.

The march took place on the same day as the first Indigenous People's March where marchers walked in the other direction on Constitution Avenue to draw attention to injustices against indigenous people.

At the day's end, while the students were waiting for their buses near the Lincoln Memorial, they met up with members of the Indigenous People's March, in particular Nathan Phillips, tribal elder for the Omaha Tribe.

In clips from a video that went viral almost immediately, students are shown surrounding Phillips, who is chanting and beating a drum. They appear to be mocking him.

One 11th-grader in particular, Nick Sandmann, who is inches away from the drummer and never moves in the video, was accused of flagrant disrespect.

The clip caused immediate outrage.

The day after the exchange went viral, extended footage of how the situation unfolded appeared on social media, and the students issued their own statements.

Longer videos revealed another group at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial: the Hebrew Israelites, who also were attending the Indigenous People's March to share their own beliefs that African-Americans are God's chosen people and the true Hebrew descendants.

Members of this group, as shown in video footage, taunted the students and some students responded back. Phillips, the Native American, walked over to the students and the group, as an intervention, singing and beating a song of prayer.

Sandmann, in a statement, said Phillips "locked eyes with me and approached me, coming within inches of my face."

The student said he didn't understand "why either of the two groups of protesters were engaging with us, or exactly what they were protesting" and that his group was just there to meet a bus, "not become central players in a media spectacle." Phillips, the tribal elder, said he was attempting to leave the area and Sandmann blocked his path.

As of Sunday, the Diocese of Covington's website has only a brief statement in response to the incident. Its Facebook page appears to be abandoned to detractors and critics. News reports indicate the Chancery was evacuated one afternoon due to a bomb threat, and the school was closed at least one day.

Several media outlets reported that the bishop sent a letter to parents a week after the incident, apologizing and saying he allowed himself to be "bullied and pressured" into a premature statement which was critical of the students and the administration.

There are more details, but this is a brief summary of what's happened. There are lessons here, not just about racism and privilege, but also about news coverage and social media's rapid response, and about how the Church witnesses in this digital public square.

The Covington story reminds us we cannot rush in hastily to judge. Alexander Pope wrote, "fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

Basic fact-checking, respect for the reputation of private individuals and acknowledgement of the vulnerability of minors, children, must be done.

Always, respect for the individuals immediately impacted by an event must be primary.

In the United States, we are beginning to speak of "a preferential option for the victims" as we attempt to tell the terribly tragic story of abuse of power among our clergy and hierarchy. In the Covington story, perhaps there were many victims – students, indigenous people, and others -- used to bolster one side or the other's convictions.

At the same time, in today's media landscape the first post, regardless of the author's motives, becomes the foundation for the ongoing narrative.

There is no time for reflection, for our better angels to take over, to consider the unique perspective of each participant in the story.

So those with an agenda, sometimes with misguided convictions and a self-centered concept of truth, fill the vacuum in the public square.

As Catholic journalists and communicators we must hold these two virtues in balance: providing thoughtful reporting and analysis, but with an efficiency and clarity so that it is impactful in today's world.

I do not recommend abandoning the task, as impossible and frustrating as it is some days. As the Pope's 53rd message for World Communication Day points out, our media environment is now indistinguishable from the sphere of everyday life. It has transformed, is transforming, what it means to be human.

St. Oscar Romero called on the laity to be "microphones of God." His willingness to speak truth to power, to be a voice for the voiceless, is why SIGNIS has declared him to be our organization's patron. The witness of his life also offers us some standards which we could apply to our own lives.

There are absolute truths, I believe. But very few.

One truth is that God has created each of us as a unique person, a reflection of God's grace and love that is not duplicated anywhere.

A second truth is that the only way to know God is through being in communion.

Today, these two convictions are often in destructive tension. The Covington Catholic situation is just one recent example of destructive encounters.

These destructive encounters harm our own dignity and the dignity of others. They often occur when we think that our understanding of the truth is what others must accept as truth.

In this approach, communion means uniformity, not real unity. In this understanding, my dignity as a human person is less than or greater than that of others.

In this world view, polarization happens because we harden ourselves into self-focused individuals, intent upon protecting our own. Encounters become a zero-sum experience – there is one winner and everyone else loses out.

But there is another way to encounter others. This way recognizes that our very uniqueness is what God uses to create communion.

We don't abandon our true identities to enter into a way of truth. Instead, our perspective enriches and builds up the communion of God's people. My individuality is necessary for communion to happen.

This year's World Communication Day message speaks to how humans can use modern communication channels for good or for ill. Pope Francis concludes his message, "This is the network we want, a network created not to entrap, but to liberate, to protect a communion of people who are free."

What would have happened if the actors in the encounter on the National Mall had used social media as a way to liberate, not to entrap, the students and the indigenous people? How could the bishop and other leaders used this as a moment to encourage understanding, for finding common ground, so all might "win?"

Can we use our convictions to move to communion? The choice is ours.