Witnessing to pro-life values
BY GOING BACK TO BASICS

FATHER ROBERT SPITZER SPEAKS WITH THE INLAND CATHOLIC ABOUT LIFE ISSUES AND HEALING THE CULTURE

INTERVIEW BY MITCHELL PALMQUIST, EDITOR

On Oct. 23, Father Robert Spitzer, former Gonzaga University president, will keynote a fundraising gala in Spokane for Healing the Culture, a nonprofit that provides pro-life curricula. The organization boasts very successful results in helping educate children in high school on life issues, often leading a majority of pro-choice students to reconsider their position.

Father Spitzer is the co-founder and chair of the board for the Healing the Culture and currently appears on EWTN as host of “Father Spitzer’s Universe.”
Inland Catholic: To start off, I would like to know about your role with Healing the Culture.

Father Spitzer: “I co-founded Healing the Culture with Camille Pauley quite some time ago, almost 20 years ago, and our objective at that time was to develop a rhetoric that young people would immediately agree to, in principle. Our objective was to give about seven or eight key principles that are accepted by secular society that would actually change the minds and the hearts of young people, so that if they agreed with those principles, then they would see that the pro-life position was a good position — not only for the individual involved, namely the preborn babies and mothers, but also for the culture itself.

“We have a pretty good sample that the curriculum works, and the principles of course are all universally accepted principles in current political culture. We just draw out the case for pro-life from them. My role has been really threefold: 1) I have been chairman of the board since the inception of Healing the Culture; 2) I write the whole theoretical curriculum; and 3) Camille Pauley (president of Healing the Culture) then takes the curriculum, which is really intended for college-age to adult audience, and she transfers them into books and a curriculum for high school students, such as principles and choices, so it’s age-and education-appropriate.”

Today, it seems like a lot of people feel like the so-called culture wars are over and it seems more and more like the high ground seems to be shifting away, at least in popular culture, from those who believe in the dignity of every person, whether it’s on gender issues, euthanasia, abortion, justice issues, etc. Where do you think we should look for hope on this front?

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“You can’t resolve the problem going from issue to issue. We are going to have to go back to good old Plato and Aristotle, who said, ‘Look, if you’re in a fight, go back to your fundamental principles from which you derived your positions on issues.’ And once you go back to those principles, then what we want to say is: ‘Do you agree with principle 1 — the principle of non-maleficence, which is don’t do an unnecessary harm to others, or if a harm is unavoidable, minimize it? Do you agree with principle 2 — universal personhood? You should evaluate every being of human origin as if it should have protection under the law until you find out that this person doesn’t deserve protection under the law. Do you agree with principle 3 — unalienable rights?’

But the main thing we want to do is to say if you have principles people agree with, then you can bring them along. If they say, ‘Yes, I agree with all seven of those principles,’ you’re going to have a hard time avoiding a pro-life position on those issues. You’re also going to have a hard time avoiding being anti-slavery and a hard time avoiding ostracizing or persecuting a minority unnecessarily, etc. Once you buy the principles, it’s amazing how much agreement you can get to, and if you don’t have agreement, at least you’ve exposed a possible contradiction in the logic of your opponent. And you don’t do it meanly, you just say, ‘You know, you might want to look at this. You agree with principles three and four, yet your position on the issues seems to conflict with them.’ And maybe you can talk through it, and maybe he’s got a reason for that, but maybe he doesn’t, but at least you leave him thinking. The old Jesuit rule of rhetoric is ‘never deny, seldom affirm, always distinguish.’ In other words, the objective is if you’re just denying another person’s position, you’re not going to get anywhere in resolving problems or issues. Don’t just blindly affirm their position to be friendly (i.e., I just want to affirm everything you say and just want to be supportive of everybody). ‘But always distinguish,’ says the Jesuit. But how do you make a distinction? You have to get to a higher level of viewpoint and that’s called a principle. Principles are the highest level of viewpoints we can aspire to. So, essentially, if I can aspire to principles, I can always make valid distinctions between a right position and another person’s position, because that’s what principles do. So I’m convinced of one thing: The current way in which the culture war is being waged is not only a waste of time, but it’s generating a lot of needless hostility. Instead of battling issue for issue, the whole policy of Healing the Culture has been to develop a set of principles. So, at the end of the day, if we don’t agree, we can know why we don’t agree, and we can also know if there are possible inconsistencies between positions and the principles people supposedly subscribe to. And that, I think, has really helped us in the schools, and also will help us in the culture wars.”
Today, how can parents speak to their children about life issues, and issues of human dignity? I’m specifically thinking about the Netflix series “13 Reasons Why.” It appears to be celebrating suicide. With this kind of questioning of human dignity, how can parents talk with their children?

“That’s a very good question … The best way for parents to approach their kids on that issue is to have them explain the four levels of happiness. Because each view of the human dignity changes, just as there is happiness one, two, three and four; happiness one being the most superficial; and happiness four being the most pervasive, enduring and deep. There are also dignity levels one, two, three and four. And if you look at the Netflix series, that whole view of dignity is levels one and two exclusively. It has no level three, which is contributive, empathetic and loving; and it has no level four, which is transcendent and faith-filled, and which is the ultimate dignity and mystery of the human being. There is nothing like that in the series.

“The complaint of this girl who is contemplating suicide is really a complaint about the quality of life, which is evaluated on an ego-comparative level, that is horrible, because 71 percent of our culture is already ego-comparative dominant. They are constantly saying who is attaining more, who is attaining less; who has more status, less status; more popularity, less popularity; more power, less power; more intelligence, less intelligence; more beauty, less beauty; more athleticism, less athleticism. That’s what they are basing their identity on. Instead of, ‘How can I make an ultimate positive difference to my family, to my friends, to my community, to the kingdom of God, to the culture, to society?’ They’re not asking that level three question, and certainly not asking the level four question, about trying to do something commensurate with a God of unconditional love. …

“That level two perspective is already killing our kids in school. The jealousy, the fear of failure, the ego rage, the self-pity, the ego blame, the inferiority, the superiority, the contemptuousness of supposed inferiors and, of course, the depression of the inferiors. All of these problems are generated by a dominant level two perspective and that’s what this series is basically elevating to the status of an unquestioned new affect. And so, for that reason, what I would advise parents is just get your kids to level three and level four. They will see right through dignity one and dignity two presented in that thing and they will get right to dignity three and dignity four.”

Even in parish life and families, there are people who disagree on life issues. How can we have this discussion without harming relationships and without hostility ending the conversation?

“I just say remember the three major rules of rhetoric to approach these situations:

“First, speak personally; just say not that I’m right, but here’s my position and here’s my reasoning — keep it personal.”

“Second, then get them to the third and fourth levels of happiness. Don’t just tell them why you are not level one and two, but why you are level three and four. You don’t have to worry. If you tell them why you are level three and four, they are going to say, ‘I’m level three and four, too.’ They are going to agree once you put it out there and explain it to people. Which of course means that they’re choosing their way out of level one, which is materialism and pleasure; and level two, which is ego-comparative. So that’s the second thing. Get the discourse up to three and four.

“If someone says, ‘I could care less about contributing to anybody, or helping anybody, listening to anybody in need, or treating anybody like a mystery, I prefer to treat them like a problem.’ You’re not going to go anywhere with that person. What you’re dealing with is a person who is so deeply embedded in levels one and two, you are not going to have a productive conversation.

“But if you can agree that we want to hold a conversation about levels three and four, then go to the third rule, which is bring out those seven principles. And if you’ve got those seven principles, if you can get agreement on those, you are going to have such a convincing rhetorical argument. You just say: ‘Here’s my reasoning.’ Keep it personal. By the end of that talk, I bet you anything that you will convert 72 percent of the people who say that they are pro-choice and they are going to say, ‘I’ve never heard anything like this before. Why don’t Catholics talk like this?’”

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