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Local Opinion: Certainty is the Word of the Decade

In a documentary interview I used in my high school biology classes, an interviewer asked a Scottish shepherd about how he dealt with an invasion of flatworms. The shepherd said that they “bash them with stones, mash them into a pulp”. Asked further if this was the best way the shepherd said, “I don’t know the best way, that’s the way we do it”. This shepherd revealed a most important part of science and something we lack in our modern retrograde world, a falsifiable tone.

The PBS NewsHour asked what the most important word was that described the past year. The word was determined to be “Exhaustion”. I found this sad, as we have no time for such luxuries, and it smacks of a pedestrian response. My choice is best displayed in the movie “Conclave”. Whatever you might think of the film as a whole, there is one true point of clarity.

Asked to speak to the conclave before selecting a new Pope, Lawrence spoke of the sin of certainty. “The greatest sin is certainty. Certainty is the enemy of union. Certainty is the enemy of tolerance” he said. He continued, “If there is only certainty and no doubt, there would be no need for faith”. The shepherd knew that and admitted that he didn’t know the best way, only his.

One need only look to the American free exchange of ideas for evidence of this. It seems that many involved are so certain of what is right and what is best. The problem is that there are more than two views regarding a best course toward anything. The problem can be relayed in an old saying that I’m fond of. It says that you can have something good, fast or cheap, but you can only have two. Thus, you must choose.

A minor point in the past Harris campaign gained my interest this year. She said repeatedly that “We” would experiment, trying new things. If something didn’t work, “We’d” try something else. This is the basis of liberal thought, the embracing of new ideas in a changing world. It’s not like we’ve been getting it right all along, eh?

I sat at an economic round table discussion a few years back. The topic was globalization. Not being overly shy in these matters, I asked what we should do with those left out of work. The counter was that those people would need to be retrained. What of those at the end of their work life, I asked. It was acceptable that some would suffer in this great cause, I was countered. I was further damned with faint praise for coming to the conference to learn, as it was outside of my field.

The defense of globalization, given with great certainty, was given by a woman at the conference representing the Heritage Foundation. As you may know, the Heritage Foundation is now singing a different tune with the same certainty that she had countered my questions in that past conference. Political winds certainly change political minds with great certainty.

If certainty is a sin, I'm sure it can be forgiven in terms of the persuasive voice. A speaker can make a point without fully describing the opposition. We should be weary of the flip-flop without explanation though. Minds can change, but there is a point where an explanation for the change is needed. A flip-flop was damning to Democrat John Kerry in 2004, whereas in the past decade flip-flops are forgiven daily in the philosophy of Republican Donald Trump. So, why the flip-flop on flip-flops?

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Truth is always about something, but reality is that about which truth is". Thus, if we seek the truth, then we must humbly understand that we are flawed creatures. In this case, certainty is a sin. If certainty is the enemy of union, then with certainty, out of many, we cannot be one.

We are being rhetorically divided to a purpose. In fact, we get along quite nicely in polite conversation. Perhaps, if we eliminate our inner certainty, we can see this better. We should try.