

Dr Helen Alvare transcript of Tim Fischer Oration

I am so honoured to be here, but also really humbled because it is an honour of such an admirable and larger than life figure, Tim Fischer. I tried to read a good deal about him before I got here, and I understand why you perpetuate his legacy so much. Of particular appeal to me as a public servant of sorts, a public academic, a Catholic, and as a mother was the way he coordinated his vocation to his family, with his equally God given vocation to politics and the welfare of Australia. Overall, few people in any country have that kind of a record in public life. So with genuine humility in light of this example combined with a desire for my own vocation to give back. Allow me to offer you some reflections about our part, yours and mine, in promoting the common good by means of what I call noble actions. You know nothing less than that noble actions in public life. Being a professor, let me organise this for you. My thoughts are going to come in three parts. First, to briefly identify our reasons for fearing, you know, stepping out into the public conversation. Second, offering reasons for overcoming those fears. And third, promptly frightening you again by suggesting that the set of issues that need particular attention today, because they're one of the leading determinants of social health and religious freedom, are what I'm going to call sort of as a body.

The sexual expression issues, whether it's contraception, non-marital births, abortion, same sex relations or transgenderism. And here I'm going to elaborate not only upon their importance, but how we might engage in public discourse on these truly neuralgic matters. And I'll be trying to draw there from my scholarship and portfolio of the last 35 years. So beginning with the matter of legitimate trepidation to step out there into the maelstrom here, we face a threat, in my view, way worse than ignorance or mean spiritedness, a seeming rejection of reason itself, as in the coming true of G.K. Chesterton's early 20th century prediction, which I'm sure some of you have read. He said, we shall soon be in a world in which a man may be howled down for saying that two and two makes four. In which people will persecute the heresy of calling a triangle a three sided figure, and they will hang a man for maddening a mob with the news that the grass is green. I remember once Richard John Neuhaus, a prominent. He had been a Lutheran pastor who became a Catholic priest in the United States. He used to say that French philosophers of the revolution of the 18th century would wake up shocked that it was the Catholic Church that was the largest defender of freedom and reason in our times, and that's what we're facing so often. It is a stunner that things have come to

this, but we can't allow it to be a conversation stopper because whether simply as human beings or as religious believers in a God who perfectly coordinates faith and reason, we are wired to believe our eyes to be reasonable.

Which disposition then gets confirmed by the unfolding of events, by history, in our own lives, and on larger stages. Of course, there's going to be holdouts, but this is where courage, persistence, research and well-honed communication skills come in. Because what's the alternative? Leaders and influencers there will always be. In my country we would say if we don't lead, if we don't influence, then for sure Hollywood will. The media will, the white House will. And at the bottom of the barrel, the Kardashians will. Okay, if we don't, they're going to have the last word. And I'm sure you have close Australian analogies. And as I'll unpack at the end of my talk, I can testify that it is not pointless to step into the arena if you have been gifted and burdened with a vocation for influence beyond your personal circle, you really ought not to stiff arm the universe. After all, when Jesus himself is asked to prioritise God's commands, he links two to love God with our whole heart and soul and our neighbour as ourself. So it's really Christianity 101 to be the woman or man for others. And make no mistake, it's a radical call because we're supposed to be called to be like Jesus.

And Jesus wasn't just marginally nicer than your average human. He is, as Scripture reminds us, the Son of God who becomes human and who dies a ghastly death for the likes of us. Okay, this is not just marginally nicer. So is it really too much to ask that if you've been given insights and a voice that might assist your neighbour, that you use them? And let me mention here those other upsides in addition to fulfilling the vocation God has given you. When you have a vocation to public life, one of the signs I've found is that your output often exceeds your input. I have so many examples of this now in moving on to four decades of this About ten years ago, I wrote a book about Catholic women in the United States, but I opened with a chapter about my fear of becoming a mother. It was a huge fear. 11 years later, I'm at some conference in New York, and a woman says to me, I read your book. It had a big influence on me that first chapter. And then she says, This is Maria, my daughter. She's ten. Talk about your output exceeding your input. You know, I just wrote a chapter about my own fears. And a vocational call also comes with its own fun. When I was regularly testifying for all the US bishops before the United States Congress, I would leave the Capitol completely energised with

a sense of having great fun, engaging in the back and forth with people who agreed with me, with people who disagreed with me.

My Officemates were horrified at the thought of going to testify, often before a hostile congressional committee, and for me, it was the most fun I had all week. A sign of your vocation. And don't worry that God will demand more of you than you could possibly give. Even the most iconic scripture about human beings vocation to care for others. The Good Samaritan story has a limiting principle. That is, you're being asked to answer the needs of those strewn on the path that you're travelling. God does not ordain that you be a jack of all trades and master of none, or that you solve every problem swirling about in the world. In fact, that's a recipe for being completely ineffective. Okay, I had a little lesson on this recently. A wonderful exchange with a bishop from Illinois. I was speaking in Chicago, and while I was renting my car, I passed the booth where, you know, the man checks you out and says you're legit to leave with this rental car. But while I was waiting, he was dressed in something close to rags. He was on the phone, not paying any attention to me, and he was near tears talking to someone who was a creditor, to whom his mother owed money for a car, and he was in panic and tears, explaining that his father had just died and that his mother didn't have the money.

But if they waited till he got paid next week, he would have the money. And I was just so torn up by listening to him that after he checked me out, I went to an ATM machine and I came back with the car, money in cash, and he was gone. And I wasn't about to leave cash with just anybody there. So I felt I had missed my opportunity. I was expressing my frustration with this to the bishop I was doing a gig for in Chicago, and he said to me, Helen, that's not the guy strewn in your path to help today there will be others, right? It's its own limiting principle, in a sense. And finally, on the matter of our trepidation to enter the public sphere, remember, the horizon is not wholly bleak. Discourse is not dead. Nobility has its fans. Still, when reason and principle and unselfish love and truth make their appearance. There is still room for them, especially if you play the long, consistent game. And it's not about you. And I'll touch on this in a few minutes. Now to my second point. In some sense, I'm really sorry to tell you that public and political arenas today are in particular need of people who can discuss the tough sexual expression issues.

I did not ask for this brief in my life, but it kept coming to me and being laid at my door. This is important because the current sexual orthodoxy, the one adopted by my

government and by some of yours, is a leading cause of the suffering of a lot of vulnerable people. And also because Christian witness on these matters has become a leading driver of the effort to constrain religious freedom. On the first point, reason and empirical scholarship affirm what faith also holds that when you separate sex from marriage, from parenting, when you put adults interests over children's, when sex is severed from tomorrow, from commitment, from children, from family, from kin, even from love, things go seriously awry. And it turns out that what passes for human progress so often the technology of contraception and abortion. Government programs at the back door, trying to help children when adults realise, realising of their own interests at the front door have hurt them, that all of these things, this so-called progress, doesn't really work. It's just not a match for the creator's plans, which is what well, he could have done otherwise. Remember, we always learn more by distinction than by description. He could have done it otherwise. But what did he do? He creates a two sex human race. Similar but different, but built for relationship, for reminding each of them and all of us in our life that no one of us is all there is.

None of us. No one of us exhausts what it means to be human. We are always needing to go out of ourselves to another who's like us, but who also requires patience, investigation, understanding and the gifts that the other can bring. The creator's plan also apparently includes putting the creation of new life together with the union of a man and a woman, in such a way that sex intrinsically poses the question to the couple, what about tomorrow? Which ends up being a really healthy thing for relationships and the creator renders children quite vulnerable, requiring long term and joint care, and instills in children the desire to love and be loved by the people who brought them into the world, if at all possible. Yet contemporary progress, even with all its technology and commitment to prevent new life or extinguish it when it's very young, even with all its promises to enhance love between men and women and to attain better parenting. Contemporary progress has led to, in my own country, more non-marital pregnancy, more abortion, more single parenting, still very high rates of unintended pregnancy, more cohabitation with its attendant higher risks of infidelity, violence, and later divorce. Less marriage and more divorce, and note that the vulnerable members of society suffer every one of these more than people with more education and more money.

In fact, in the US, it is not race that marks the difference between those who have money and education and those who do not. It is rather the single greatest factor is

family structure. That is, the presence of parents who take care of children together for their long, stable lives. In other words, the very people the new sexual orthodoxy claimed it would help are the very people that it is hurting the most. Other kinds of social progress too, concerning not just poverty, but crime. Educational attainment, emotional balance, long term economic welfare all importantly depend upon adults committing themselves first to the welfare of the children they make. Empirical studies are firm on this, and in the UN we now have agreement or the US, the UN, the United States. We now have agreement between the think tanks on the left and the think tanks on the right on this precise question. Undoubtedly. Then sexual expression and familial matters need all the help they can get in the public square today. And because Christianity is one of the last voices refusing to bow to this new orthodoxy due to its commitment to the vulnerable, to truth and to love, Christian religious freedom is being hotly challenged, hotly challenged. But let me pause for a moment and ask, why do you think these matters are so neuralgic in our time? Doesn't that every once in a while don't you say, why is this the issue that dominates the news so often? The focus of so much rights talk, the focus of so much repression of religious freedom, and why Christianity's particular response, which was largely mirrored across the world until it seems just about ten minutes ago by governments and the people alike, is particularly hotly contested right now.

I think the range of answers to this question supports my proposal that sexual expression requires particular dedication today as a public discourse issue. First, maybe the answer is theological. Some of you have heard in a letter to the Italian Cardinal Caffarra, who was setting up the John Paul two Institute years ago for study of marriage and family, he wrote to the last seer of Fatima, Sister Lucia, and asked her for prayers. And instead he got this letter back that said, quote, father, the time will come when the decisive battle between the kingdom of Christ and Satan will be over. Marriage in the family and those who work for the good of the family will experience persecution and tribulation. Digging deeper. Why might this be so? One thought I have is that the current challenges to Christian norms are, in essence, a denial of God's creative sovereignty. A reprise of human original sin in the garden. It's our version of I will tell you what is good or evil. I will reject your plan for creation and human flourishing. I will deny your two sexed creation that their union can lead to new life, that human life has any intrinsic value.

And without getting all eschatological on you, let me say that it worries me that I may be on to something here. Another possibility is that because God makes the human race in his image and likeness, when we obscure his design for the human race, maybe we're going to have more trouble glimpsing him, and we're going to have more trouble than understanding ourselves as being made to love like God. In other words, when we obscure or deny the existence of two sexes, similarly similar but differently gifted, designed to live in a permanent interpenetrating love whose unity brings about new life, we might also really be obscuring God's Trinitarian nature, and this also means we're going to get confused about God's love, which, remember, is the love. He also charges us to show one another as in love one another as I have loved you. In short, this is fundamental stuff. Saint Paul confirms this in the letter to the Ephesians in chapter five when he says, marriage between a man and a woman is some kind of privileged glimpse of the relationship between God and ourselves. So when the government or others try to shut down a Christian witness on sexual expression matters, this is not just for us. Oh darn, we are so offended that our norms are ridiculed kind of thing.

It's rather a matter of both obscuring architectural elements of our faith and silencing a voice that the most vulnerable people in society really need to be out there. Now to my last point how to meet this challenge. I'm going to begin by noting how we're presently doing it, and then offer some suggestions for improvement regarding both content and process as to how the churches are presently doing it. I'm not overly satisfied, which, believe me, is putting it nicely. Um, far too often, I think, and I see this in the United States very much. Our churches, our religious leaders, say things like, we have a rule and we can't violate our rule, and we know how much the public likes it when we have a rule. Or second, they'll say, the pastor or the bishop or the pope insists. And of course, we know the public loves that too. And there we let it rest. Unsurprisingly, onlookers are not impressed. Instead, they characterise our norms as unthinking, unkind, ancient, irrelevant, or wait for it unchristian. Especially, they say we are not respecting women or persons experiencing gender dysphoria or same sex attraction. They frame our demands for religious freedom as asking for a right to do wrong. I think there's two leading points we need to make in response. First, as discussed above, we need to remind onlookers that our norms are not mere moralism, by which I mean man made rules, but rather their architectural to our faith.

Because understanding human beings in the way God made them is the way to understand how God loves us. And we're supposed to love him and one another. Asking us to live our romantic and familial lives differently is like asking us to practice another religion. Second, we need to communicate that our norms are loving. There's a couple subpoints to this. One is already noted. They are loving, in fact, as measured by more empirical studies than we've ever had to our credit in the history of this kind of research. When a man and a woman refused to sexually objectify one another, when they remember that sex points to tomorrow, even when a particular encounter is not procreative, but that it's simply one of the constituting features of a sexual relationship when they're faithful to one another, when they're permanent, when parents allow a child to grow rather than to resort to abortion, when they provide a child a stable home. When these things happen, the human beings involved, especially the most vulnerable, benefit enormously and in every way. They're provided the strong foundation from which to go out into the world and face its inevitable difficulties. And these practices, as I've said before, are probably the most efficacious way to help the poor in the long run overcome the wealth, income, educational and employment gaps that we're seeing in society. Honest scholars really don't disagree with these conclusions, but we need to sound them all the same because there's a lot of dishonest denials of them, too.

We have to communicate that our norms are social justice norms. It is not a case of Catholic social justice. Nice Catholic family norms mean okay, which I think is a big theme out there from the beginnings of Christianity. This has been understood that our sexual expression norms are social justice. Christian sexual expression norms were greeted with particular affection by women and by the poorest members of society, including slaves. In the marvellous words of Yale classics scholar Sarah Ruden in a book I really recommend *Paul Among the People*, she writes, Christian teachings offered a new way of thinking that must have been quite exciting a hope for something beyond exploitation, materialism and violence. A plan not for competing in purity and the denial of life, but for the sharing of life in full. It offered a chance not to be treated as a thing. In fact, during its earliest centuries, according to the eminent historian Kyle Harper in his book *From Shame to Sin*, which I highly recommend, the transition from the Roman to the Christian family ethic and Rodney Stark's, um, on Christianity. Christians were distinguished by their conspicuous chastity. Isn't it fascinating that it's become a distinguishing element of ours? You know, almost two millennia later, it's risen again. Christians distinguish themselves from the Roman manner of handling sex,

marriage and parenting, which had different rules for masters than for slaves, different rules for men than for women.

There was not so much right or wrong when it came to sex and family and marriage, as there was honour and shame, and this was wholly dependent on your sex and your social class. For Christians, things were different, not only respecting sex and marriage, but for all social justice. Why? Because of the way Jesus instructed them to love all persons without distinction. They didn't distinguish between loving them in the family and loving them outside the family. That love, in every case, had to be radical self-emptying for the good of the other, acknowledge the sacredness of the human body. And as Paul wrote in Romans one, respect the created world as God had made it. Thus, according to historian from Princeton Peter Brown, you may have read some of his stuff on the on on early Christianity, this radical love translated itself across categories. He points out that the early fathers, who were the most insistent in their sermons on how people treated one another in the family, were also the most insistent on Christians obligation to care for the poor. Thus, for Christianity, the emphasis on celibacy, on martyrdom, on the chastity for all equally. Thus, the Irish bishops who captured this so brilliantly in their document love is for life, when they simply characterised Christian familial norms as an application of the Good Samaritan principle to our romantic interest and to the family.

I would add that these persons are those persons that some of us are most likely to encounter, strewn on our path of life, and who we will affect most deeply and indelibly. Of course, we all have an obligation to people beyond the family, and some of us are lucky enough to work full time in those ministries. But it's really easy for us to forget to exercise justice and love in that first society. Meaning the people you're running across on your way to the bathroom, in the kitchen every day. Otherwise, we practice love and dreams, but not so much love in action. In short, there is not now, nor has there ever been a sliver of daylight between Christian, sexual and familial norms and what we've come to call our social justice norms. We are called to show radical Christian love in both arenas. Finally, about the how of speaking to this the process? Not as much the contents. This is equally important. A lesson that I learned the really hard way when I would get on TV or in some kind of public lecture and do it the wrong way and absolutely crash and burn, make a fool out of myself, embarrass my own people. So I want to share four brief points in conclusion on this. First, the fundamental lesson get it

very clear in your head that your work is a service, not an exercise in pride or triumphalism.

This is not a status oriented, grasping mentality that you should use when sharing these things in public. Perhaps surprisingly, humility, not normally considered a virtue in public life, leads to better work, more enjoyment, less hand-wringing, and, over the long run, more courage and energy for the task at hand. And of course, this shouldn't surprise us in light of that mysterious passage from Philippians describing how Jesus quote, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, humbled himself, becoming obedient to death. Because of this, God greatly exalted him. That's our way. Okay, I've certainly experienced this in my own life. When I sought to write the Great American Law Review article, to be best in my field to published in the highest outlet, I was constantly, constantly plagued with feelings of inadequacy. What topics should I use to get the best chance of publishing? Who did I need to know? Who's doing better than me? What are the scholars coming up behind me? Who could best me? But I had a long come to Jesus talk with a friend of mine who actually worked at the Secretariat of State at the Vatican. She said to me, are you really trying to do God's will or just make it in your own field? Had I considered the most pressing needs of the church in the world, areas that I might be willing to enter where others feared to tread, she recalled me to a version of service which meant not just worrying about the prestige, but getting the writing out there and sharing what needed to be shared, and sticking it on platforms where everybody could get it, which is what I did.

And she was so right. And over the long run, lawyers and judges and even other academics looking for a voice that didn't just parrot everybody else and that provided a solidly sourced, competing view, began to rely on my work, even if only as a foil. I would also add that a vocational mindsets better motivating. You are trying to serve the truth, the vulnerable Christ, the church. These are big responsibilities. You will be motivated to be the smartest person in the room on your topic. You will be motivated to know the objections to your arguments and to be ready to respond to them, because this is not about you. This is about the needs and the welfare of others, so you just have to get to work. Related to this is my advice. When you are really living your vocation, don't worry about your immediate impact. Do your best and trust that by virtue of that alone, someone is benefiting to the work you're called to.

I remember once speaking on a very popular political debate show in the US. My opponent cut me off at every second, and I had the impression that I said nothing. And in the old days, when this wasn't online and I had to actually order a transcript, I ordered a transcript to see what I said, and it was things like, uh, um, uh, and then I would just be cut off before I could get out a full word. The reason I ordered the transcript is because I was getting all these pieces of fan mail for that particular interview. They said things like, you kept your dignity. You made me proud to be a Catholic woman. Thanks for representing us. I figured out that it was my manners. A pleasant look on my face and attempt to do my best. That was more important than those great arguments. I never got to say, okay. That tone style mattered. Also, being honest and thorough and fully researched and maintaining your composure. Support another way of engaging in public, which is playing the long game, right? In the short game, it seems like you have to make a big splash, maybe even be combative. Used Unnuanced even sensational language. Spread yourself thin so that whatever things are happening, you're there. Ignore the weaknesses in your position. Impugn the motives of your opponents. Win the favour of those people who have the greatest influence.

I could go on, but I am old enough now to see that whole arc of history that everyone's talking about, to see how behaving as a principled player in public dialogue is not only a gift to the long term tone of the public square, but is also effective. One of the things I've learned about being Catholic in the public square, on all sorts of neuralgic issues, is that we will never, as religious folks, be fully loved or trusted by either political party or fully by the media. We're often perceived to be irrational simply because we're people of faith. Our arguments get double and triple checked. We're told that we have to live up to the what would Jesus do standard. This can seem super constraining in the long run. Others meet behind closed doors with party leaders who trust them. Others stretch or ignore the truth. Others don't get measured against God himself. But in the long run, it turns out that these constraints were just the thing I had to approach political leaders in all camps with friendship, and with an ability to treat my issues in a way to explain them to them as a commitment to human rights that I trusted they wanted to uphold. I had to do my research and triple check it with the goal of being the best prepared person in the room. I had to cure my my abrasive, I know better personality in favour of beginning with respect and listening to where the other person was coming from.

Then after doing this for a while, I noticed that people were respecting me as a principled player. A pro-legal abortion Catholic female columnist at the New York Times who was kind of a big deal, began to refer to me in her column as the person you could really talk to on this issue and get an honest answer. Talk show hosts at the usually really hostile National Public Radio were asking me for annotated bibliographies on the topics that they were covering and willing to have me in to debate these issues. Don't get me wrong, these results are neither guaranteed nor immediate, nor were they a feature of all my work. But they happened over time all the same. My final thought learn to communicate boldly and briefly. Communication is not a lesser intellectual discipline. It's crucial. Say, for instance, in public society is fortunate to have our witness on these disputed matters and then explain why, say, truth and empirical scholarship are our best friends, and then show them that. Do not just blather on about what you know. Tell people what you want them to believe and why they should be confident in believing it and at all times. Remember, it's really not about you. It's about him and everyone that he's given to you to love and to serve. Thank you very much.