

# Should we be 'men who row against the current'?

“Many false idols are held up today. For Christians to be faithful, they can't be afraid to go against the current,” tweeted Pope Benedict XVI as @Pontifex on Twitter on January 23. It was the Pope's English translation of the second tweet he sent in Latin.

By reading the wording of that Latin tweet, we can see how there is something lost in translation: *Plures hodie comparent rerum species falsae. Verum fideles si videri ipsi cupiunt christiani, dubitare haud debent contra aquam remigare.*

That last phrase *contra aquam remigare*, translated as, “go against the current,” literally means, “to row in opposition to the water.”

Those familiar with the best of classical thought will recognize the phrase. It occurs in the Roman Stoic philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca, who was alive during the lifetime of Jesus Christ. Seneca was first the tutor and then later the advisor of the emperor Nero, who eventually forced Seneca to commit suicide over a plot to assassinate him.

Seneca himself famously discusses the thought, *remigare contra aquam*, meaning,



Global Theatre  
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“to row against the current.” It occurs in a letter he wrote, now numbered as Letter CXXII in Seneca's *Epistulae*. The phrase occurs at the conclusion of that letter, summing up a key idea for Stoic philosophy, which is that we ought to live *secundum naturam*, meaning, “according to Nature.”

Seneca writes to his correspondent, *Ideo, Lucili, tenenda nobis via est quam natura praescripsit, nec ab illa declinandum: illam sequentibus omnia facilia, expedita sunt; contra illam nitentibus non alia vita est quam contra aquam remigantibus.*

In Richard Gummere's translation, the concluding thought is rendered thus: “If we follow Nature, all is easy and unobstructed; but if we combat Nature, our life differs not a whit from that of men who row against the current.”

But in his tweet, Pope Benedict is obviously alluding to a different kind of Nature. He is referring instead to the fallen world and its



A screen cap from Pope Benedict's Latin Twitter account notes that for Christians to be faithful, they can't be afraid “to row in opposition to the water.” C.S. Morrissey writes the Pope calls Christians to row against a “Nature ... disordered by human intelligence and will.”

current of opposition to the Christian way of life.

Christians “can't be afraid to go against the current,” tweets the Pope. In the Latin, the Pope literally says that Christians “can't be afraid to row against the current,” using the phrase, *contra aquam remigare*, thereby inviting us to compare his thought with Seneca's.

This fallen Nature that the Pope calls Christians to row against is a kind of second Nature. It is Nature as it has been stamped by disordered human intelligence and will.

The Pope talked about it in his February 6 general audience as the Nature that is marked by original sin: “The tragedy of Adam's sin, by falsifying our original relationship with God, has affected our relationship with one another and the world itself.”

But the first kind of Nature is Nature as ordered by God, which is the meaning of Nature to which Seneca refers when he speaks of the Stoic ideal of life according to Nature. The Pope also described this first Nature in

his February 6 audience:

“In the work of creation, God is seen as the almighty Father Who by His eternal Word brings into existence a universe of goodness, harmony, and beauty. The world thus has meaning as a part of the divine plan, a plan which in a special way embraces man and woman as the culmination of God's creative activity.

“The Scriptures teach us that man was created in the image and likeness of God, formed from the dust of the earth. Here we see the basis

not only of the unity of the human family but also of our inviolable human dignity. We also see something of the mystery of man as a finite creature called to a sublime role in God's eternal plan.”

It was hard enough for a Stoic like Seneca to live according to human dignity – to row according to Nature – in Nero's imperial court, where the disordered second Nature of a corrupted Roman culture was running wild.

In our time, the spread of technology makes it even more challenging to live according to the first kind of Nature, the order of God. Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1970 in his book *From Cliche to Archetype*, “A planet parenthesized by a man-made environment no longer offers directions or goals to nation or individual.”

What then is the answer to this technological dilemma? It seems that human intelligence and will must strive even more vigorously, but for a new kind of second Nature – a culture of life – that would be in harmony with the first Nature, God's “universe of goodness, harmony, and beauty.”

For this new second Nature, we need to cultivate a real culture and not a fake culture. The second Nature that we build with our minds and hearts has to seek, like the Stoics, a harmony that does not row against God's first Nature.

The task has never been more challenging. But as the philosopher Roger Scruton has written, “culture is important. Without it we remain emotionally uneducated. There are consequences of fake culture that are comparable to the consequences of corruption in politics. In a world of fakes, the public interest is constantly sacrificed to private fantasy, and the truths on which we depend for our rescue are left unexamined and unknown.”

C.S. Morrissey is an associate professor of philosophy at Redeemer Pacific College. Roger Scruton will be speaking about beauty and culture in Vancouver on Sunday evening, May 5. For event information, see [moreC.com/scruton](http://moreC.com/scruton). □

## Letters to the Editor

### Saddened by B.C. Catholic

I was saddened and mortified at reading the commercial posing as an article published in *The B.C. Catholic* Jan. 28 issue promoting destination weddings.

As an official organ of the archdiocese, this paper should concentrate more on marriage as a sacrament than as a celebratory “collective ‘eloping with a crowd.’”

The travel agency wants to help, but gives incomplete information about the inter-diocesan paperwork involved, and there is no mention about the marriage preparation that is required of the couple.

It was decided years ago that destination weddings would not be promoted, to avoid factors which could invalidate the marriage. Mexican bishops were also alarmed over the increasing number of weddings being performed in hotels and on beaches.

It is all too easy for couples to concentrate more on the frills of their wedding day than on the seriousness of the step they are taking. The sacrament of marriage has so many challenges. Let us not permit the profane to override its sacredness.

**Msgr. Pedro López-Gallo**  
Judicial Vicar

### Comparing apples and oranges

Re: “Catholics Come Home initiative shifts gears,” in the Jan. 28 issue:

Mr. Jordan's comment about those who complained that money for the Catholics Come Home initiative would be better spent on the poor reminds me of the story of the anointing at Bethany, as recorded in St. Mark's Gospel.

When a woman anointed Jesus, some said the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor.

With all our justified concern towards carrying for the poor, which the Church certainly does in a major way, we sometimes forget that the primary role of the Church is to worship God, and to aid others in doing so. This is exactly the reason for the current Catholics Come Home initiatives.

Comparing the efforts involved in cultivating faith and in giving alms is like comparing apples and oranges. Poverty is a complex issue that has many different facets. Poverty and other adverse situations can either weaken or strengthen one's faith.

The poor do not need only food, shelter, and medical resources. By stopping poverty, we do not necessarily create faithful Catholics. The poor are people with higher needs, just like the rest of the not poor or not so poor, as seen in psychologist Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs.

China, at one point, used the argument that their government's job was to feed 1 billion mouths, so there was no need to talk about human rights.

The two are not mutually exclusive.

The Catholic Church has always cared, and always will care, for the poor and the needy. But let's not forget why the Church is there in the first place.

**Nancy May**  
Vancouver

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