



## Reflection from Fr. Don Farnan

### WORD CEREAL

Polarity is natural but polarization stymies progress and stability. Community and communion are good, but communism is not. Secularity is a reality, but secularism is damaging. The clerical state can be holy, but clericalism is evil.

Comedian and social analyst, George Carlin, offered numerous ponderances on words we use and phrases we say in which there is a thin line between similarity and difference: *“Why does ‘fat chance’ and ‘slim chance’ mean the same thing?” “Why is ‘phonics’ not spelled the way it sounds?” “Why do we sing ‘Take me out to the Ball Game’ when we’re already there?” “How come ‘abbreviated’ is such a long word?”* He liked duck season and deer season but wondered why we have ‘tourist season’ if you can’t shoot at them. He contemplated whether a stupid person could be a ‘smart-ass,’ and urged FedEx to merge with UPS so they could become *Fed Up*. He accepted that two wrongs don’t make a right while admitting that three lefts can. He pondered why we call it ‘lipstick’ if her lips can still move, and why we call the time of day we move slowest ‘rush hour’.

Carlin’s observations brought laughter and reflection. As our ecclesial and federal governments deal with struggles of an increasingly polarized church and country, we could use a bit of his word-humor to enlighten and lighten us. Political issues are overwhelming: the economy and student loan forgiveness, safety and urban homeless, drugs, and crime, immigration and child trafficking, the sanctity of life and care for underprivileged people at every age and stage of living. Democrats and Republicans need each other, as do husbands and wives. Though Carlin tried his approach in marriage counseling: *“I’ll try to be nicer if you try to be smarter,”* we know that existing together takes lots of work and willingness to build upon common ground. But it will never work if we insist on dwelling in bunkers of ideological extremes where *“isms”* reign.

Socialism or communism, though rooted in community and care for one another in our society, usually results in misery and oppression. Secularity, where church meets society, is different from secularism, where societal mores and trends overwhelm and water down the religion to make it less sacred. The clerical state, that helps spiritual leaders connect laity with God, is different from clericalism, where the ordained exalt themselves and lord it over others whom they consider to be ontologically inferior. Polarity holds in balance contradictory tendencies or opposing forces—like men and women or conservatives and liberals—but polarism or polarization keeps them from ever coming together. It is interesting to me that most church liberals and progressives today conserve original traditions of the early church while most conservatives and traditionalists do not. Maybe this is little more than word-cereal or, as Carlin also once asked: *“Do you think illiterate people get the full effect of alphabet soup?”* Excepting those who appreciate irony, it need not be given any more thought.

But I’ll leave you with this final ponderance as “election season” revs up, as the president continues to nibble on children and forget where he is, as the former president continues to cruelly insult opponents with bombastic insults, and as the vice-president continues to offer up incomprehensible word-salads amidst intermittent laughs and gaffes. Whether it’s Trump or Biden, our pastor or pope, we might heed another of Carlin’s profound statements: *“His people would follow him anywhere—but mostly out of curiosity.”*