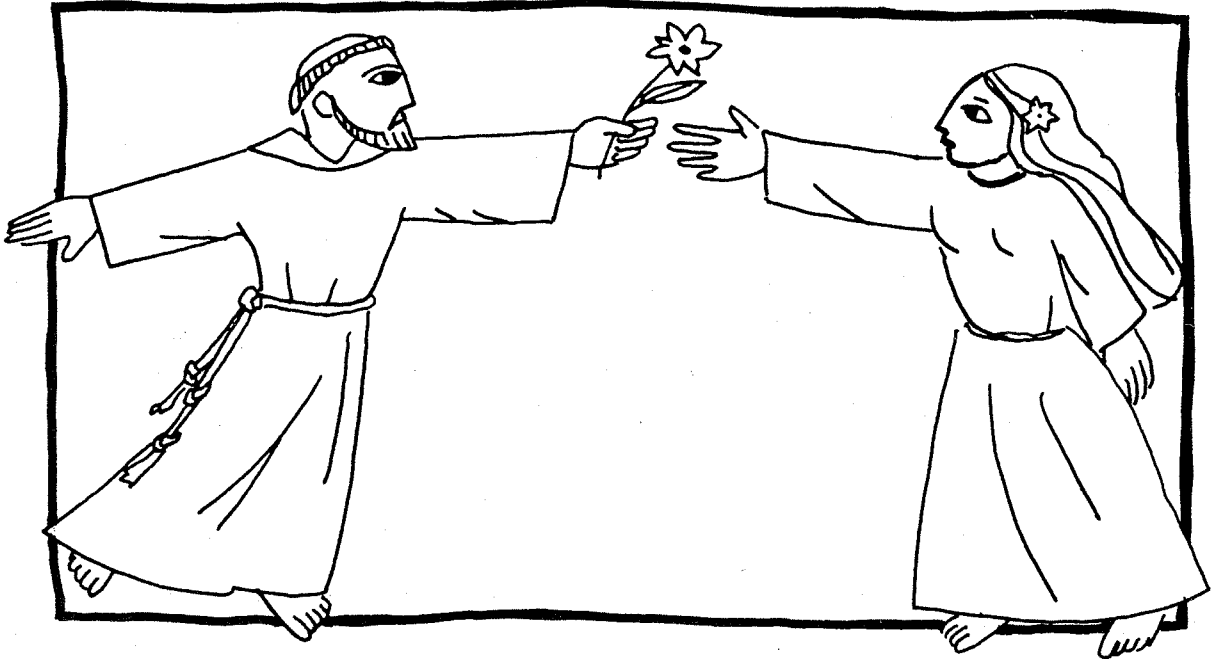


Change and Return

Thomas Storck



Sometime in the 1960s the movement or way of life that became known as the counterculture began. Though certainly related to the more political New Left, the counterculture nevertheless was distinct in that it was more interested in cultural than political change. Speaking in the most general way, one can say that the burden of the counterculture's challenge to the establishment culture was that the establishment culture in North America and most of the Western world had misused social organization and technology to create a civilization that was estranged from nature, both human nature and the natures of the various created things we need to live our lives and which make up our earth. And even though the counterculture seems to have given place to the New Age, a movement less admirable in every way than its predecessor, still I think that a discussion of the connection between the counterculture and Western culture, and particularly the traditional religion of the West, Catholicism, could be useful.

Adherents of the counterculture usually assumed that their ideals bore absolutely no relationship to anything in Western civilization. They tended to look to the civilizations of India or to Native Americans for affinities to what they held. And the defenders of contemporary Western culture, the establishment culture, agreed with that assess-

ment. But one of the strangest things about any consideration of this question is that both the defenders of the establishment and the adherents of the counterculture were often mistaken about what each was committed to. Members of the establishment often loudly proclaimed that they were preserving eternal verities, whereas quite often the ideals they embraced were of relatively recent origin. Industrial capitalism is one case in point. Far from being something traditional in Western culture, it is something that was developed fairly recently on the ruins of all that is really native to our civilization.

On the other hand, although members of the counterculture assumed that the ideals they accepted are radically opposed to everything that Western culture has ever stood for, in many cases they have simply rediscovered Western traditions that have been lost or obscured for the past hundred or even three hundred years.

One example of this is our attitude toward nature. Since the triumph of the philosophy of Rene Descartes and Francis Bacon, which began about three hundred years ago, Western man has too often taken a ruthless, mechanistic view of nature. The earth has been seen as something not only to be enjoyed by man, but changed and twisted until it is no longer recognizable. We have not tried to work *with* the earth and all created natures, but merely to change what is

inconvenient to us. Men imagine that any other attitude is foreign to Western civilization. They do not realize that Aristotle, whose thought for centuries dominated Western philosophy and education, took a very different view of our relationship to nature; a view that in many ways approximates that of the counterculture.

Many other examples could be cited. But the most interesting is the relationship of the counterculture to Catholicism, the religion that has shaped so much that is typical of Western culture. It is largely unknown that the Catholic religion and the culture it fosters exhibit striking similarities to much that characterized the counterculture. For example, in the Catholic literary and intellectual revival of the first half of this century, a number of the most famous Catholic writers, such as Hilaire Belloc, G.K. Chesterton, and Christopher Dawson, explicitly opposed industrial capitalism, and recommended a return to small, craft-oriented enterprises in rural settings. E.F. Schumacher, author of *Small is Beautiful*, and a convert to the Catholic faith, advocated many of these same Catholic proposals in his own excellent works on economics. Many of these writers also warned of pollution and environmental damage long before there was an organized environmental movement. In fact, the reason there was no concerted Catholic effort to influence society on these issues was because most Catholics were not Catholic enough; they were ignorant of the rich tradition of Catholic thought and the implications of their own Faith.

On another important issue, Catholic faith and tradition have always championed the concept of the organic community, bound by family and similar ties, rather than the atomistic, striving group of individuals that modern society has created. The teaching of the Catholic Church is that there is a natural unity in society. Each person and each group has a natural part to play, and harmony will arise if each part fulfills its function. The relationship between different groups or classes must be based on a recognition that every person has needs because he is human; and that the community must see to it that he is able to live in a manner worthy of a human being. The Popes have specifically rejected the notion that the so-called laws of economics can ever override one's right to be able to live in human dignity. This teaching of the Church has been updated and adapted to modern conditions beginning with Pope Leo XIII in 1891, and continuing through the present Pontiff, John Paul II.

In regard to specifics, the Popes and other Catholic writers have advocated such things as employee-owned or managed industries, labor unions, cooperatives, the family farm, and a living wage for all workers.

And in areas other than economics, Catholicism also has affinities with the counterculture. Most people are aware that the Catholic Church promotes natural family planning and condemns unnatural forms of birth control, a position also taken by some noted countercultural writers. But in addition, Catholic writers have also promoted breast-feeding of babies; even during the forties and fifties, when very few mothers nursed their babies, manuals written for Catholic parents consistently recommended breast-feeding. La Leche League, the well-known organization that supports breast-feeding and a general way of life more in harmony with nature, was founded by a group of Catholic mothers and named after a shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary in St. Augustine, Florida.

Catholicism has also always taken account of man's need for festivity and celebration. The word "holiday" comes from "holy day;" Catholic religious celebrations are both religious and festive, as can especially be seen in places such as southern Europe or Latin America where Catholic culture has traditionally flourished. And though Catholics greatly respect Sunday, the day of the Lord's Resurrection, as a weekly holy day, we have never taken the Puritan view that it need be a dour and boring time. Religious services, yes, but also festivity, games, and plenty of human interaction.

It must be admitted that most Catholics are unaware of this heritage of ours and fail to live it fully. Even so, in the families and lives of many ethnic Catholics in this country one can see an emphasis on community through such means as large families, the extended family, and a concomitant rejection of the atomistic striving that unfortunately characterizes America and much of the modern world. "Family and community first" is a quite different motto from "self first."

But despite these scattered survivals from our rich Catholic past, there is a tremendous work of education to be done within the Church. Catholics must be taught not only the truths of our Faith, but the necessary implications of these truths for our lives and our culture. No one should have an illusion that this will be easy, but there is no other way in which we can promote the full flowering of the Faith, a faith that was meant to transform not only our personal conduct and our families but our nations and cultures and the entire world. This is simply the social reign of Jesus Christ the King and it is our first task and duty after the conversion of our own lives and the salvation of our own souls.

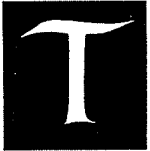
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When Small is Sensible

Culture, Technology and Subsidiarity

Thomas Storck



he following little story is a fitting way to begin this article, since it illustrates well the principle I am about to discuss:

A Cistercian Abbey, which, according to the general idea of Cistercian life, is rooted in the soil and continues its praise of God in harmony with the woods and fields around it, had for forty years relied upon the weather-sense of its principal lay-brother. He could go out in the morning and sniff the air to discover what sort of tricks the sky was about to play, and so make plans for haying, harvesting and suchlike. He knew the locality thoroughly, and hills, trees, mists all told him the secrets of the future. The day came when a well-intentioned visitor presented the community with a splendid radio. Guests could be entertained by it, but for the monks its only utility was the weather forecast, and to the despair of the old brother and the harm of his farming, the Abbot dispatched a monk every morning to take down the often-inaccurate prognostications of the B.B.C. (Conrad Pepler, O.P., *Riches Despised*, chap. 3)

Most readers of these pages would probably agree that what the abbot did was wrong. But exactly why was he wrong? Aside from the fact that the official weather reports were often erroneous, what, if anything, was wrong with discarding the traditional way of predicting the weather? What, other than our instinctive feeling that something is wrong, can be said about it?

I would suggest that the key to understanding exactly why the abbey should have continued using the services of its lay-brother lies in a principle first enunciated by Pope Pius XI in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* of 1931. Pope Pius wrote:

...it is a fundamental principle of social philosophy, fixed and unchangeable, that one should not withdraw from individuals and commit to the community what they can accomplish by their own enterprise and industry. So, too, it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance of right order, to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for

by lesser and subordinate bodies. Inasmuch as every social activity should, by its very nature, prove a help to members of the body social, it should never destroy or absorb them. (Section 79)

This principle that larger bodies should not take over the functions best performed by individuals and smaller groups is usually called the principle of subsidiarity. It has a number of obvious applications. For example, since families can raise and care for children satisfactorily, it is wrong for the state to usurp this function. If an entity such as a craft guild is able to regulate a trade effectively, so that quality products are provided to the public at a fair price, with no injustice to workmen or owners, it would be wrong for the central government to insist on regulating the trade instead. Or if joint union/management committees could adequately set industry safety standards and perform factory inspections, why should the state create its own bureaucracy to do this?

Now, these are all good examples of the principle of subsidiarity as applied to socio-economic affairs. Indeed, this is where Pope Pius originally meant that it be applied. He saw central government burdened with the task of regulating economic life: a necessary task, the Pope insisted, but one that could be better carried out by groups intermediate between the individual and the state, such as a modern form of the craft guild or joint union/management organizations. Such groups would, of course, need to be watched over and backed by the authority of the state as a last resort, but ordinarily they would be independent and self-governing.

I think this principle is a very wise one in the economic and social spheres, but can it be applied more widely? Does it have anything to teach us on other subjects? I believe it definitely does. I think it can be applied to at least two other areas, namely the fields of culture and of technology.

Culture is a word with different but related meanings. It can mean the entire way of life of a people or nation, everything from the kinds of music and art they have, to their marriage customs, to the kinds of pots and pans they use. And it can also be used in the narrower sense as referring only to art, music, literature, and the like. In both senses of the word, cultural objects today are mainly mass-produced, and local culture survives mostly as a quaint thing in specialty shops for tourists. Our music and our pots are both centrally produced and distributed in the most up-to-date fashion. But aside from the ill-effects this has on our economy, what does it do to our

cultural life?

If the creation and possession of culture is a distinctly human thing, a thing that allows human groups, from tribes to nations, to establish bonds among themselves and develop a feeling of rootedness in the soil as their own place on the earth, then is it just as satisfactory if people simply receive their culture from others instead of participating in cultural creation themselves? Is it good that localities have lost their own cultures and instead accepted the products of mass culture, usually a sort of vapid amalgam of various dissimilar cultural strands? As I wrote several years ago,

If individual localities can create their own art and music and dance, then it is "a disturbance of right order, to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity" these tasks, such as a radio station beaming its music over wide areas, a record company selling its recorded music throughout entire nations, and so on, for recorded music is surely responsible for the practical disappearance of music-making at the family and neighborhood levels.

People have a natural desire to create cultural objects and will do so unless someone else appropriates the task. If what we call popular music is not available via the electronic media, then people will create their own. This fact seems to me sufficient proof that the principle of subsidiarity applies here, for who will argue that people are better off simply as passive receivers of culture? Why should the once-flourishing local varieties of everything from art to cooking vanish so that inferior and mass-produced items can take their places? If it is better for man to control his political and social institutions at the lowest level possible, then how can it be healthy for his cultural affairs to be handled in a centralized manner? A civilization is not a divided thing, that on the one hand encourages localism and on the other centralization. If political and social control is truly distributed, then it follows that cultural control also will be, for these matters are inter-related. A culture administered from centralized points, such as our own, necessarily fosters the notion that it is better, indeed that it is natural, for all government and society to be centrally managed. Whether that central management is from a heavy-handed government alone, such as in communist China, or from heavy-handed business corporations in addition, as in our own country, matters little. The cult of centralization is promoted all along the line. If we attack this cult at one point, we must attack it at every point. Indeed, centralization is so pervasive that it has shaped even the material side of our culture, our technology and technological products.



The story with which I began this article seems to me a perfect example of the perversion of right order by modern civilization. When the weather can be predicted adequately locally and with no technology at all, how in God's name could anyone ever propose that instead a complicated apparatus be used to receive weather reports made miles away by men using even more complicated apparatus? Yet this sort of thing happens every day in our culture and we take no notice of it. God has provided mothers with perfect food for their babies at no cost. What is our common practice? To take other substances, process them in expensive polluting factories, transport them in expensive polluting trucks, and *sell* them to the mothers! And after this the formula they buy is a mere imperfect imitation of what is already there for the taking.

The principle of subsidiarity for technology might be formulated thus: it is evil and a disturbance of right order to use a more complex technological device when the same end can be attained by a simpler device or by no device at all, unless use of the simpler means would cause considerable damage to the social order because of the amount of time or human labor it entails. It is obvious that what I have written is similar to proposals made for what is called appropriate technology. Indeed, E.F. Schumacher actually quotes the definition of subsidiarity from Pius XI, applying it, however, to the theory of organization rather than technology (*Small is Beautiful*, part IV, chapter 2, "Towards a Theory of Large-Scale Organisation"), and without identifying its author. This concept of appropriate technology is important as one means of evaluating technology by more criteria than the narrow question of whether it performs some small task well. It is not enough to ask, for example, whether an electric toothbrush can brush teeth well. Yes, it can do that. What is needed is to ask why there is any need for the use of electricity here, when one can brush teeth just fine using a simple utensil

and the muscles that God gave us. There should always be some evident reason for complicating any device or process. That something more complex can be invented is not sufficient reason, nor is some small savings in time or effort.

The principle of subsidiarity can also be applied to the complexity of organization quite apart from the technology involved. Several years ago, for example, Oklahoma was exporting coal to Wyoming while Wyoming was exporting coal to Oklahoma. Perhaps they are still doing it. Instead of such stupidity, though, we might consider the suggestion that we try to see how *much* can be produced locally, rather than how little. Apart from special cases occasioned by climate or lack of raw materials, is there anything to be gained by all the importing and exporting that we do? Just as it is absurd to import baby formula from the grocery store and factory when God has provided abundant milk in a mother's breasts, is it not nearly as absurd to import food from far away if it can be grown as easily locally? Human needs are everywhere that man lives and so are the means of meeting them: people and their skills, land, rain, sunlight, minerals. Maybe God disposed things that way so we could get the two together, our needs and His provision for them. Maybe we are the ones so stupid as to separate the needs and their remedy, so that we try to import from everywhere to feed ourselves, at the same time desperately shipping our stuff to meet needs halfway around the world.

The environmental implications of what I have written should be clear to everyone, for one of the reasons why we are in the environmental mess that we are is that we habitually and grossly violate the principle of subsidiarity. Moreover, the effect on the environment is one of the things we need to look at in judging whether or not an invention infringes the principle. In addition, some confused thinking on the part of many environmentalists might be clarified if they realized that it is people violating subsidiarity who cause environmental damage, not people *per se*. The mere presence of people generally does not harm the earth. The problem, rather, is the way the people live: their abuse of resources and energy, their pursuit of what seems to them comfort and convenience, even when such pursuit reaches absurd and grotesque lengths and engenders disastrous consequences. If some American environmentalists focus their efforts on reducing the number of people in poor countries instead of reducing the number of gadgets in rich ones, maybe that is because they themselves are unwilling to give up their affluent style of life.

When we think about what a really healthy civilization would look like, or perhaps even take a few tentative steps toward achieving one, there are many principles we need to understand and apply. Subsidiarity is just one of them, but I think that it is one of the most important. Without it we are hampered in seeing why some things are wrong and must rely on instinct and feelings, which are not always safe guides. But if we can learn to examine our society in light of this principle, then we can add one more piece to our building

of the true city, the earthly city that is of both God and man. We know this city, if ever attained, is not destined to last forever, yet while we are pilgrims here its building must be one of our chief strivings.

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The Wind

I guess I'll go to town

There's more there
more videos in the video store
more laughs on the sound track
more voltage in the nerves
more music loud as death

Our land is there and richer now
in the eyes of speculators
we wave to our neighbors circling for a
parking place
our hope is in the mall the heaven of want
our children the saved are there already
having become personnel

This is how it is since the wind began
that blows everything that way
at night the wind comes up
in the morning
something else is gone

What we owned we sold to the town
what we build is in the image of the town
the colors are thin and the names are wrong
sadness takes it
sadness mocks us
mocking it we leave for town

Out here there's nothing to listen to
when the sun goes down there's nothing to see
my voice is small in the fields
they take it away to be buried
in town the lights are on and you live forever

—Maclin Horton