

**CHRISTENDOM
AND THE
WEST:
ESSAYS ON CULTURE,
SOCIETY AND HISTORY**

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To Daniel Nichols

in gratitude for *Caelum et Terra* magazine,
1991-1996

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PREFACE

This collection of essays is an exploration of some of the issues regarding the Faith and the culture that it has created, as it has been expressed in its first homeland, Europe, and in Europe's extensions overseas, especially the United States. To some extent they were occasioned by the debate over multiculturalism which began raging fiercely in the United States in the late 80s. It seemed to me that many interesting issues were raised by this debate, and that it afforded a good opportunity for Catholics to examine the connection between the culture and civilization created by the Church — Christendom — and what we call Western culture. Until something is attacked or questioned it is often taken for granted. Thus when Western culture is attacked we are forced to articulate exactly why it is valuable. But in order to do that we must first examine it and understand it. Then perhaps we will see that its value does not always lie where we thought it did. The value of Christendom is in its being a *Christian* civilization, and any defense of the West that does not recognize this does not understand either the genesis or genius of Western culture.

Most of these essays have been previously published, in *Caelum et Terra*, *New Oxford Review*, *Faith & Reason*, *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* and *The McNeese Review*. These have all been revised, to a greater or lesser extent, and I hope that their republication, together with those published here for the first time, will contribute to study and debate of these important cultural matters.

Thomas Storck
Feast of St. Polycarp, 1999

WHAT IS WESTERN CULTURE?¹

Almost every time that we read the newspaper or listen to the news on TV or radio we see or hear the West mentioned. Until the fall of Communism in Europe, such mention was apt to be in connection with some military initiative in opposition to the Soviet Union and her allies. Currently it is more likely to be about some economic problem or program. And although the news media seldom take the trouble to define the word West, it is not difficult to figure out what they mean by it. Unfortunately, for them the term signifies no more than a political or economic bloc, the United States, the European Union, some other European countries, such as Scandinavia or Austria, and a few countries in Asia or the Pacific such as Australia and New Zealand. And because the media's notion of the West is repeated so often, many of us begin to see the West chiefly in their terms: the West is nothing but a political or economic bloc committed to certain things, chiefly democracy and freedom, conceived principally as freedom for moneymaking and pleasure seeking, and, till recently, organized to defend itself against another bloc of nations that wished to destroy or inhibit that freedom. Of course there is occasionally some mention of "historical values" or such, that are seen to be at the bottom of the unity of the West, but in our media's conception these are so ethereal as to mean little besides an adherence to representative democracy and a minimum of restraints on conduct. With abortion legal in nearly every one of these countries, they surely do not include a respect for human dignity!

Because the public and civic life of Western nations shows no deeper unity than a superficial political and economic likeness, most publicists and commentators assume that that is all there is to the West, at least today. It is merely a group of nations with some sort of common historical background, but sharing nothing important now but a commitment to preserving its freedom for materialistic and hedonistic pursuits.

But is this all there is to the West? Is it only a grouping of nations seeking to preserve the material goods and worldly pleasures they possess? Although I think that many Catholics in the West know that our civilization is much more than this, yet we too are affected by the media's conceptions and for that reason are apt to forget just what Western culture really is and what gives it its unity. For example, many of us follow the common practice of classifying Latin America and

such eastern European nations as Poland and Hungary as non-Western, clearly an historical absurdity. In this essay, then, I intend to set forth some of the basis for the West's historic unity and show how that is still important for us today.

How do we discover the ultimate basis of the unity of the West? Jacques Maritain captured the essence of the West in one sentence, when he wrote that the Greek people "may be truly termed the organ of the reason and word of man as the Jewish people was the organ of the revelation and word of God."² The West then is nothing but a rich fusion of the word of God and the word of man, all that our culture has received from God by way of revelation and all that we have received by way of the exercise of reason. The former, the theological content of Western culture, comes from the revelation God made to the Chosen People – to Abraham, Moses and others under the Old Law, culminating in the coming of God himself as man. And though the final form of this theological content is in Catholic doctrine, its origins lie in the Old Testament covenant of God with the Hebrew people. The second of the two words, that of man, is from the Greeks. Of all the peoples of the earth known to us, only the Greeks developed a rational investigation of all things, of the world, of man, and even of God, unmixed with myth or theology. Only they have what may be called philosophy, simply and strictly speaking. This rational examination and consideration of things, though in no way opposed to revealed religion, is separate from it, and allows men to systematically discover and classify the essential truths about nature, man and his soul, the state, law, even many truths about God. Philosophy, moreover, has long been known to be an indispensable handmaid for theology and theologians.³

This then is the double tradition of the West, for what makes the West not just a geographical, but a unique cultural unity, is this fusion of the two traditions.⁴ The Hebrew tradition, obviously, was an absolutely unique phenomenon, because God gave to that nation alone a revelation properly speaking; the Greek tradition, though a human accomplishment, was a singular one and undoubtedly fostered by God in that place and time. Both traditions contributed knowledge of truths to the entire human race, the Hebrew of truths of the divine nature and his dealings with man; the Greek of natural truths.

The Hebrew tradition from the beginning was oriented toward all of mankind. Throughout the Old Testament, starting even with the call of Abraham in Genesis 12, the universal import of God's speaking to

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the Jews is clearly stated. What God is saying to Abraham is meant not just for his children according to the flesh, but somehow and at some time for the entire race of men.⁵ The Incarnation and the subsequent establishment of the Catholic Church were thus not only the climax of the old law of Abraham, Moses, the prophets and of the sacred kingdom of Israel, but were the achievement of a goal more or less explicit in the tradition from the first, namely, the universalizing of that tradition, as the spiritual goods of ancient Israel and of the Old Testament were now made available for all men, together with a sure and clear means for their salvation in the founding of the Church and the shaping of Catholic doctrine.

But although the revelation to the Hebrews clearly points beyond that people alone, their theological and intellectual tradition and vocabulary were framed in terms of their unique relationship with God and the various institutions and practices, such as the covenants, the Exodus, the Mosaic law, and the Davidic House, which arose out of that relationship. Thus both the Old and the New Testaments present salvation history in a way that usually emphasizes its particular and unique connection with the Chosen People and with concrete events in their history, even when it witnesses to God's design to save all men. In order, then, for this spiritual content to be easily accessible to all, the Church had to leave that particularizing Jewish context and enter into a context that was at least potentially universal.⁶ This it was able to do because of the availability of the Greek intellectual tradition.

Now what is true is always universal. Even a simple truth such as "John is sitting" is universally true if it is true at all, since the fact that John is sitting is willy-nilly true for everyone. Now truths about the most important things, about God, man, the world of natures, change and permanence, etc., are not only universal but they are important. The Greeks had discovered very many such important truths, and moreover, since they sought to understand reality as it was in itself, without reference to time or place, the terminology they employed in their intellectual investigations was, in principle at least, accessible equally to men of any time or place. The nascent Church likewise had the even more important truths of the Gospel to communicate to men. And it was inevitable that as the Church communicated her truths, points would be raised, both among Catholics and by the Church's enemies, which would involve questions that the Hebrew tradition could not deal with definitively with its own intellectual terms because of its concrete and

particular mode of understanding and expression. How, for example, are we to conceive of the inner nature of God himself – the relation of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, or of the union between the divine and the human in our Lord? What terms from the vocabulary of the older Mosaic or the Wisdom traditions, or of the earliest Catholic writings, the epistles and the Gospels, are adequate to precisely describe these sublime mysteries? It was because the Greek terms and the entire Greek intellectual tradition was at hand that the Church was able so comparatively easily to formulate her theology, something necessary if the spiritual message received from the Jewish tradition was to be made available to those of other places, outside the Hebrew tradition, and, more importantly, of other times. As a matter of fact, this process had in part begun even in the New Testament and in a sense was inseparable from use of the Greek language.⁷ For example, in using the term *logos*, St. John, without in any sense basing his thought on that of the pagan philosophers, necessarily commenced that fruitful contact between the claims of the Faith and the Greek intellectual tradition. Even earlier, the use of Greek in the Septuagint and the Jewish Diaspora generally made such intellectual interaction inevitable and some tentative effects of this can be seen in such a place as the Old Testament book of Wisdom.⁸

The contribution of the Greeks, then, the “word of man” is absolutely vital, since without it the unique phenomenon of Western culture would not exist. We take their contribution largely for granted because, thanks to the Medieval scholastics, Greek logical concepts have permeated our language and thinking. Every time we use the words “essential” or “nature” (as in “the nature of the problem”) or “substantially,” we are using, however attenuated they may have become, Greek philosophical terms and the concepts behind them. But if one could see a culture untouched by the influence of ancient Greece, then one would see classifications, concepts and distinctions we take for granted ignored. This heritage of Greek philosophy is the patrimony of every Catholic, and to a great extent those outside the Church are losing the ability to make the distinctions on which sound thinking depends. So not only our Western spiritual heritage but also our intellectual heritage needs to be defended today. Catholicism itself would look very different, in its intellectual and theological aspects, had it developed in India or Africa without benefit of Greek philosophical categories. It would still be true, of course, but I think one could say that it would have a harder time expressing that truth, because its theological vocabulary would lack the philosophical terminology necessary for making clear distinctions.

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The thing that Maritain calls the “word of man” is basically the ability to conform the mind to what is, and to sort out from all that we see around us the basic units, as it were, of existence. For example, we see colors, we see things moving and changing, coming into being and passing out of being. What is basic? Some of the very early Greek philosophers, as they groped their way toward truth, argued that everything was in flux and nothing stable existed; others argued that there was no real change at all. Though the truth of this matter may seem commonsensical to us, it is so in large part because we are the unconscious heirs of their search for and attainment of philosophical truth. Or again, if I see a baby today and not again for fifty years, is it the same person that I see, since his shape, weight, color, the sound of his voice, have all changed? Is there something basic that has endured so that I can rightly say he is still the same thing? Bertrand Russell actually argued that each new time I see a particular person it is not the same person that I am seeing, but only “a complicated series of occurrences, bound together by causal laws.”⁹ Well, doubtless under the protection of divine grace, the ancient Greeks, Plato and especially Aristotle, realized that substances, that is, persons and things, are what basically exist, not color patches or isolated sounds or sense experiences. This probably seems obvious to us, but I think it is so obvious in part because we have the intellectual heritage of Greece behind us.¹⁰ And though all this may seem like unnecessary abstruseness, such questions have very practical effects in everyday life that would surprise many of us.

Greek philosophy, therefore, when used by and in company with the theological revelation that came from Israel, is what makes Western culture distinct. Western culture has received unique blessings from God in being the heir of both Jews and Greeks and as such is able to perform well the function that a culture was meant for. The word culture comes from the Latin *cultura*, a word that means simply cultivation, as in farming or gardening. Our word agriculture comes from *agri cultura*, the cultivation of a field (*ager*). But just as not everything one does to a field is cultivation, for example, to throw dirty oil and old bottles and tin cans into a field will not help the crops to grow, so not everything one does to man really cultivates him. Cultivate means to help something to grow in its proper direction, to help it to become what it is supposed to become. Do some cultures do this better than others? I contend that Western culture cultivates man better than any other culture does, because, historically speaking, it is based on truth, both divine and human, and surely man cannot be perfected according to anything except the truth.

Unfortunately, one must say “historically speaking,” because today Western civilization is far from its roots in Hebrew and Greek truth. Moreover, this departure from its historic path is not something that began in 1967 or 1932 or 1918. Western civilization has been tending away from its own genius since the end of the Middle Ages, and has been rushing away from it since the early 18th century. Today the West is actually to a large extent a baneful force in traditional Third World countries where we break down age-old ways of life and village cultures. As an Iranian friend of mine once put it, today the West seems to stand for nothing except technology and pornography. But despite this ugly present day reality, it is still useful to study and know the West, both for hopes of restoration as well as for the nourishing of our own spirits and the setting of our own minds in order.

In order to understand the foundations of the West, however, there is one more contribution, besides that of the Hebrews and the Greeks, that one should consider. This is the Roman effort, which provided for the expansion and stability of the earlier accomplishments, which were strengthened and developed by the Romans. Although their contribution was not as original as that of the Hebrews and Greeks, it consisted of three important elements: a universal empire, universal law, and the consolidation and extension of the Greek and Hebrew achievements.¹¹

In discussing the Romans and their contributions to Western civilization, however, we must not forget that the Eastern and Greek-speaking portion of the Roman Empire was still very much in existence throughout the Middle Ages until 1453, and though non-Latin, can hardly be called non-Western. In fact, Western culture has always included areas not of Latin culture. For the Byzantines, of course, had no need of the Latin tradition to mediate Greek thought for them, and even if they did not appropriate their own classical tradition in the same way as did the Latins – for example, the philosophical tradition – still they were conscious heirs of the vast learning of the Greek Fathers, which itself made use of much of the best of pagan thought. There were also important missionary efforts by the Greeks, as in the work of saints Cyril and Methodius and in the conversion of Russia, which brought both Catholicism and Western, but not Latin, culture to great areas of eastern Europe. Nevertheless I think one can say that the most distinctive part of Western culture was the Latin, and without the achievements of the Romans in western Europe the development of Western culture would have been considerably hindered and perhaps imperiled. The idea of

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the universal empire of Rome had a powerful impact on men's minds and imaginations throughout the Middle Ages and up through the 18th century. It was an idea of unity with diversity – not the kind of unity where everything becomes the same, but where local customs and attachments are fostered within a larger whole. The idea of Rome was one of the chief things making for the international character of Christendom. The knowledge that Rome had once ruled over most of Europe made a great impression on the men of the Middle Ages and indeed they themselves attempted to perpetuate the international character of Rome's rule. Thus they created the Holy Roman Empire, which endured until A.D. 1806 and was conceived to be in some sense the same state as that of Caesar and the ancient emperors. From Rome Europe received an international culture – nationalism and nations as the modern world understands them did not exist, of course. The Latin language was one major factor in this culture and of course Catholicism was the most important part of it. Within the boundary of the old empire, wherever men looked physical monuments of Rome remained and were in daily use – Roman roads, bridges, aqueducts, walls, etc. The Medievals were well aware of the significance of Rome, and thus Rome and what she stood for as a universal city was a major force making for a European-wide civilization. Pope and Emperor were the twin heads of this Christendom, and Christendom was a universal entity.

Some interesting words of Pius XII on Italy's role as a universal mediator of culture can be applied, *a fortiori*, to Rome the center of Italy.

Situated in the middle of the sea, at the crossroads joining three great continents, Italy is in a certain sense the geographical center of the world. This is especially true because of the many peoples that have continually passed through Italy and contributed to a universal, comprehensive, open character (such as is rarely found in any other nation). We may truly, then, affirm that Italy does not belong to Italians alone, but to all peoples. This has been Italy's past and shall be her future.

Roman law is the patrimony of humanity; Thomistic philosophy, the most universal of philosophies which presents and sheds light on the entire hierarchy of being, was born in Italy; the Divine Comedy is both national and universal, just as that supreme expression of Michelangelo's genius which bears witness to the entire human race reunited in trepidation for the Universal Judgment. Greco-

Italian culture initiated European culture, and therefore, that of the modern world.¹²

It is interesting that modern man sees his ancestors as having been more parochial than he, whereas in fact, the opposite is true. Traditional European man was more cosmopolitan, but at the same time more rooted in place than we are. Though intensely nationalistic and looking at things through the eyes of our partial and one-sided cultures, we have very little sense of place. The patriotism of the nation-state that we cultivate is hardly the same as the local patriotism of the medievals and ancients. We have got everything exactly backwards. Because of the lack of strong nationalistic bonds and the presence of such supra-national forces as the Latin language, a largely international academic and intellectual life, and international dynastic ties, traditional Western man rightly regarded all of Europe and the West as his home. But at the same time, he had much more of a sense of place than we have, who are apt to move about, especially within our own countries, and in fact to carry our national prejudices with us wherever we might go. If it is possible to have parochial cosmopolitans, then the modern world has managed to produce them!

In the study of law Rome's genius can also be seen, for she pioneered in establishing a systematic, reasonable approach to jurisprudence, and Roman law is the basis of law today in continental Europe, Latin America and elsewhere. When Roman law was revived during the high Middle Ages, its study became the foundation for any scientific legal work, and even influenced the common law of England during that law's very early period. Without the Roman law's codes, casebooks and the other parts of the Emperor Justinian's compilations, legal study would have taken many more years to attain to the systematic state it has today.

To a great extent Roman law is the application of Greek thought to juridical questions, and the clarity of the distinctions that the Greeks made in investigating all reality the Romans were able to appropriate for their practical needs in administering the state. But though law is a practical science, good law and jurisprudence are based ultimately on good metaphysics and the superiority of Roman law to some of the crudities of the barbarian legal codes is simply the superiority of Greek reason to blind reliance on tribal tradition untempered by philosophic reflection.

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Rome's third achievement was her consolidation and extension of Greek and Hebrew attainments. Although Greek civilization had spread far beyond Hellas, Greek political and military strength, despite Alexander's conquests, was not powerful enough to conserve these gains. In the East Greek culture was actually losing ground when the Romans came along and established it on a stronger political and military base. The Romans were eminently practical, and having once accepted Greek culture, they set about organizing things. That is what Pope Pius XII meant when he praised the Rule of St. Benedict, calling it an "outstanding monument of Roman and Christian prudence."¹³ For prudence is the virtue especially needed by the practical man, and the Romans had this natural virtue to a high degree. Though the Church, of course, can survive without Roman culture, nonetheless God made use of the peculiar strong points of the Roman achievement in the first centuries of the Church, as he previously used the Greek accomplishments in philosophy to orient the beginnings of Christian theology and philosophy. Indeed, at one time the liturgy contained a Postcommunion in the Mass "Pro Imperatore" which began thus: "Deus, qui ad praedicandum aeterni Regis Evangelium Romanum imperium praeparasti . . ." ¹⁴

The Gospel was preached throughout the Latin-speaking regions of the Empire, and later, when the Church began to penetrate lands never conquered by Rome, Catholic missionaries brought Latin culture with them (though one must recall what was said earlier about the Greek areas of Western culture and their missionary activity). Thus all of western and northern and central Europe received the Latin tongue, and with it classical philosophy and Latin literature; in fact all the intellectual heritage of the Hebrews, Greeks and Romans. Latin Christian civilization became extended through Europe, and together with the lands of Greek culture, resulted in Christian Western civilization.

This short summary of the richness of our heritage is not intended to take the place of study or serve as a kind of quick review of what one has learned and perhaps forgotten. Rather, perhaps, it can be a guide to orient one in those studies, so that what otherwise might simply be a mass of authors and dates becomes instead an integrated culture, a unity from diverse sources, but brought together into the most wonderful whole that the world has yet known.

Also, as the Church contemplates the necessary task of "inculturating" Catholic faith and practice in places such as Africa, we might remember that some features of civilization as it has matured in

the West seem to have a universal mission, and cannot be dismissed as merely a European way of looking at things.¹⁵ If philosophy is the “word of man,” then it is the word of men not only in Europe but everywhere, and likewise the undiluted Gospel message is meant as much for pagan Africans as it was for pagan Europeans. Christ died for each equally.

Lastly, to recall the original genius of the West can also perhaps be an antidote, an antidote to the poisonous message continually given us by our mass cultural organs, that the only value of the West is the technological and affluent society which we enjoy – or suffer from – today. Too many Catholics in the United States act, and presumably think, as if this were true. No wonder that so many in academia and the media despise the West, if this is all it means. But by taking a look again at what it really does mean, we may be able to learn enough to defend it – not because it may have given us a better mousetrap, but because it has shaped better men – more human, more natural, and therefore more open to the supernatural workings of Almighty God.

NOTES

¹ Originally published in *Faith & Reason*, vol. 20, no. 1, spring 1994.

² Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (London : Sheed and Ward, 1947), p. 33.

³ “It was because of its noble and indispensable contribution that, from the Patristic period onwards, philosophy was called the ancilla theologiae. The title was not intended to indicate philosophy’s servile submission or purely functional role with regard to theology. Rather, it was used in the sense in which Aristotle had spoken of the experimental sciences as ‘ancillary’ to ‘prima philosophia.’” John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, no. 77.

⁴ The Western world, then, comprises those nations and regions whose cultures were formed by the Catholic faith and Greco-Roman civilization, either originally or derivatively. Thus all of Europe, Latin America, North America and such outposts as the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand are parts of the Western world. In fact, central and eastern Europe and Latin America are much more integral parts of the West than is the United States. Our common journalistic exclusion of Latin America and central and eastern Europe from Western civilization indicates how most of us think only with regard

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to political or economic facts, rather than the more important cultural and historical realities.

Related to this is the absurd characterization in the United States of Hispanics as a non-Western or non-European minority. Hispanics are quintessentially Western, and in fact are responsible for bringing Western civilization to this Hemisphere.

⁵ “and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” or, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Genesis 12:3.

⁶ Of course, the Church, particularly in the liturgy, has always used many of the concrete images of both the Old and New Testaments, thus making them familiar to the whole world. Consider simply the designation of the Lord as the Lamb of God.

⁷ When St. Paul preached to the Greeks of Athens, he spoke of God in this manner, i.e., without reference to the concrete aspects of Old Testament revelation or the Messianic tradition. See Acts 17:16-34.

⁸ See Wisdom 8:7.

⁹ Quoted in Henry Veatch, *Aristotle, a Contemporary Appreciation* (Bloomington : Indiana University, c. 1974), p. 14.

¹⁰ Quite obviously, many modern thinkers, not just Bertrand Russell, have abandoned the sane teaching of Aristotle. Hume, for example, affirmed that what is basic is our individual sense impressions, and in some versions of modern physics material substances are simply thick places in an all-pervading field of energy: Sir Arthur Eddington wrote that the seemingly solid desk at which he sat was in reality “a host of tiny electric charges darting hither and thither with inconceivable velocity. Instead of being solid substance my desk is more like a swarm of gnats.”

¹¹ “Thus Rome gave us the framework, as Athens and Jerusalem on the whole gave the inner content of our living Christian civilization.” Gilbert Murray, *Hellenism and the Modern World* (Boston : Beacon, c. 1954), p. 19.

¹² Allocution of March 23, 1958, quoted in John Navone, “The Greatest Christian Hero, Philosopher, and Poet: Christopher Dawson’s ‘Italian Trinity,’” *Italian Journal*, vol. 5, no. 3/4, 1991, pp. 32-33.

¹³ Encyclical *Fulgens Radiatur*, para. 14, March 21, 1947.

¹⁴ This is the Mass “for the Emperor,” and the prayer in English is, “O God, who prepared the Roman empire for the preaching of the Gospel of the eternal king . . .”

¹⁵ “...in engaging great cultures for the first time, the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought. To reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history. This criterion is valid for the Church in every age, even for the Church of the future . . .” Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, no. 72.

THE WEST AND THE VOCATION OF CHRISTIAN CIVILIZATION¹

The heritages of Western culture and of Christian culture are so inextricably mixed that to most people they seem to be one and the same thing. And though historically this has been largely the case, in principle they have never been identical, and the very fact that the West is no longer Christian, yet still remains the West, indicates that the two have always been potentially separable. The West was made by the Faith and its vocation was to be an incarnation of Christendom. But despite this, Western culture has not always been entirely comfortable in this vocation. In this essay I intend to explore the theme of some of the relations between Western and Christian civilization, and what the rejection of its vocation means for the West's relations with the rest of the world, as well as for the Church and Christian civilization.

The Faith was born on the fringe of the ancient classical Mediterranean culture and soon began to permeate that culture in both its Greek and Latin halves. Now this classical culture was unique in that it possessed philosophy, the rational investigation of what is.² But this does not mean that it would have remained unique forever had the Faith not arisen at that place and time. As G. K. Chesterton argues in *The Everlasting Man*, had the Church not begun its transformation of European³ civilization when it did, that civilization would most probably have reverted to the intellectual norm of fallen humanity.

If the Church had not entered the world then, it seems probable that Europe would be now very much what Asia is now. Something must be allowed for a real difference of race and environment, visible in the ancient as in the modern world. But after all we talk about the changeless East very largely because it has not suffered the great change.⁴

Something of this process may be seen in the history of Greek metaphysics. After reaching its heights in Aristotle it easily declined into Neo-Platonic mysticism. This occurred even among the professed followers of Aristotle himself.

The Peripatetics of the latest period can indeed hardly be called Peripatetics – certainly not without qualification: to all intents and purposes the School was absorbed in Neo-Platonism, the last great effort of Greek philosophy . . .⁵

What the Church did, then, was to select the rational elements in classical thought that might otherwise have faded into insignificance, and thereby create one of the two pillars of Western civilization. Had this not happened, the distinctiveness of Greek philosophy might well have been lost in a welter of mystical teachings, only loosely and historically connected with the founding giants of Greek philosophy.

In short, if classic paganism had lingered until now, a number of things might well have lingered with it; and they would look very like what we call the religions of the East. There would still be Pythagoreans teaching reincarnation, as there are still Hindus teaching reincarnation. There would still be Stoics making a religion out of reason and virtue, as there are still Confucians making a religion out of reason and virtue. There would still be Neo-Platonists studying transcendental truths, the meaning of which was mysterious to other people and disputed even amongst themselves; as the Buddhists still study a transcendentalism mysterious to others and disputed among themselves.⁶

In the long run, then, pure Greek philosophy was valued more by the Church than it was by the Greeks themselves, for like the rest of fallen mankind, then and now, they found it irksome to keep their minds on metaphysical truths when it was so much more pleasant to rummage about among the many mystical teachings that the human mind can create, stopping and tasting what one found agreeable, but never needing to make a commitment to the reality outside of our own minds. So although from the Greeks came the “word of man,” this would very probably have been swallowed up in the wordy babble of fallen man, had not the Church, with the Hebrew word of God, come along at that time.⁷

Under the influence of the Church and of Catholic life, then, the thing called the West came into being, formed of God’s newly completed revelation, rooted in the Jews, and of Greek philosophy and its legitimate offspring, such as Roman law.⁸ Because of this, the course of civilization in Europe and the surrounding lands was altered forever. This process, which began in the age of the Fathers, by the time of the Middle Ages had created in the soul of the inhabitants of the West “a change which can never be entirely undone except by the total negation or destruction of Western man himself.”⁹ Western culture can never go back to its pre-Christian past in any real sense. Of course, various thinkers can play

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at doing so, but, as has often been pointed out, the West can only be post-Christian, never non-Christian or pre-Christian.

The Faith formed Europe into a unity in the same process as it formed Catholic civilization or Christendom,¹⁰ for this latter historically has subsisted in the former. In fact, without Christendom, Europe would have no unity, just as Asia has no unity. The elements of classical civilization that became part of the patrimony of the West were spread throughout Europe by the missionaries of the Gospel. It was not pagan culture that was carried over all Europe – it was the Catholic faith which brought with it Western culture, that new creation of the Church herself. The political power of Rome, in fact, had been in retreat for some time and on all the frontiers the barbarians were pressing hard. But even after the Empire was overrun, the Faith that was preached near and far in Europe brought with it that classical learning that included the philosophy of the Greeks. What eventually made the Norsemen, for example, part of the European and Western unity, was not their geographical location in Europe – still less the decayed power of the heirs of Charlemagne, who represented the political heritage of Rome in western Europe, and whom the Norse generally defeated in battle – but their acceptance of the sweet yoke of Jesus Christ. This made them Christians and at the same time began their incorporation into the culture of the West.

The result of this, then, was that a new civilization came into being, the West or Christendom, having as part of its constitution the philosophical learning of the Greeks. But this philosophical learning was always able to be taken by itself and made, against its own nature, into something opposed to the Faith. The fact that the distinctiveness of the West has survived the dissolution of Christendom shows this very clearly. For although Western civilization evolved as a Christian civilization, the elements contributed by the classical pagans, even though selected and transformed by the Faith, could always in principle be separated out and made supreme. And in fact, throughout the history of Christendom there has been a recurring tendency for exactly this to happen, the effects of which were potentially catastrophic, such as the teaching of the Latin Averroists of the 13th century, and in fact, the general secularization of thought and life that, from the 17th century, has pretty much completely triumphed by our day.¹¹ It has always been within the power of the West to reject the Faith which made it. But the exaltation of what is regarded as the purely rational can be done only

in a manner unique to the West. No civilization outside of the West could have initiated secularism. If eventually the entire world becomes secularized, it will be because the entire world has become Westernized.

Philosophy has certainly made secularization possible. And since philosophy is native only to the West, so is the possibility of secularization. But is the West unique simply because it possessed philosophy (and thus the possibility of becoming secularized), or is it unique only because philosophy did indeed break away from the Faith and secularization did occur? On this latter view, the West is unique not because of the mere possession of philosophy, but because it is secular and technological; it was the first culture to pass beyond “traditional society.”¹² Its role in the world therefore would be “the destruction of all traditional cultures through the universalization of the scientific objectification of the world and the goal-oriented rational organization of life . . .”¹³ On this view, the destruction of its own traditional culture was the logical outcome of the West’s own genius, and that genius is now propelling it in its task of extending that destruction to all other traditional cultures in the world.

But another view is possible. Although the West did contain within itself the possibility of its own unmaking, this unmaking has in fact been a betrayal of itself. The problem of the West today then becomes its alienation from itself. The universal tendencies which are found only in Christianity and Greek philosophy have been turned toward ends which are as equally foreign to the West’s genuine constitution as they are to the rest of the world. This will become clear if we look at the vocation of the West with regard to the other peoples of the earth.

If the vocation of the Western world was to be an incarnation of Christendom, how was that vocation to shape the West’s relations with the rest of the world? In what way was this vocation for the rest of mankind? If one looks at how God has worked in history, I think one can discern to some extent the divine intention. After the Fall of our first parents, God chose Israel and began the long work of preparing her for the Incarnation. And after the Incarnation of our Lord came the incarnation of his Mystical Body in history and culture, the Catholic Church and Catholic civilization. But significantly, this second incarnation was firmly established only in Europe and the surrounding lands. It would seem, then, to be part of God’s intention that through or by means of Europe the rest of the world was to be evangelized. Thus Europe’s vocation is for the rest of the world. Europe, indeed, exists *for* the world, and her vocation to incarnate Christendom necessarily

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contains a relation with the whole human race. As the original home of Catholic life, the vocation of Europe was to build a civilization and from out of that civilization to take the Gospel to all of mankind.

And, of course, through many centuries Europe did just that – along with many other deeds *ad gentes*, deeds good and deeds bad. The West obviously has transformed the face of the earth, as well as the shape of men’s minds. But the point here is that since it has this outward vocation, the West necessarily and always relates to and impacts upon other peoples and other cultures. Although the legacy of centuries of Western domination of much of the earth is mixed – the Gospel was indeed preached, but much evil was also done and taught – today the preaching of the Gospel is a smaller part of what the West does than ever in the past, and the evil as great as ever, probably greater than ever. In fact, today one can speak of the West’s having assumed an anti-vocation. Since the West exists *for* the rest of the world it cannot simply content itself with its own affairs, but must now take up an anti-mission. Instead of spreading the Gospel the West exports secularism, capitalism and its accompanying consumerism, pornography, a frequently disruptive technology, for if Western man does not preach the Gospel, he will preach something else.¹⁴ But it is worth noting that even in the way in which Western culture goes about this anti-mission, there are unmistakable elements that are drawn from its original Christian vocation. This is particularly striking in the matter of the assumed universality of its ideas.

Catholics have always regarded the Faith as a universal religion, that is, as one intended for all men and for all ages, and rightly so. Our Lord’s parting words, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you . . .” (Matthew 28:19-20) are an obviously authoritative statement of this universality. But generally speaking, the rest of the world had nothing similar which was considered as universal. Compare these statements made by a modern Hindu. “Many sects professing many different beliefs live within the Hindu fold” or “Hinduism is wholly free from the strange obsession of some faiths that the acceptance of a particular religious metaphysic is necessary for salvation . . .” or, lastly, “[Hinduism] did not regard it as its mission to convert humanity to any one opinion.”¹⁵ Paganism, of whatever variety, has no real creed and thus cannot have

a desire to spread any particular belief throughout the world.¹⁶ But although the West has abandoned the Christian faith it has by no means abandoned the universalism of its missionary spirit. The only difference is that now the West is preaching other ideas it regards as universal: liberalism, progress, democracy, capitalism, feminism, communism (until recently) or nationalism – even this latter is a universal idea, since every nation and people is expected to be nationalistic.

This anti-vocation is furthered by the export of the products of the modern media throughout the world, that portray fornication and adultery as normal parts of life and utterly ignore God and any manifestation of religion in everyday existence, as well as by the spread of consumerism together with the production of useless gadgets and goods. One particular exercise of this zeal for an anti-vocation may be seen in the Cairo conference on population and development of September 1994. Here the United States, with the concurrence of nearly all Europeans, sought to impose on the rest of the world abortion, contraception for married and unmarried alike, and sexual instruction that would destroy modesty and promote unchastity. And the very next year after the Cairo conference, we witnessed at Beijing a feminist missionary zeal worthy of Catholic saints – if it were not in the service of the Devil. But I think that the single-minded fervor of the feminist delegates, as well as their desire that every nation receive the feminist gospel, owes more than they might like to admit to the zeal that created Catholic Europe and sent missionaries over all the earth. Again, a mission becomes an anti-mission and ardor for the true and the good becomes ardor for error and evil.

Moreover, it is curious that those who criticize the presumed exclusive attention to its own intellectual and cultural heritage on the part of the universities of the West, on the grounds that other civilizational traditions deserve equal, or greater, recognition, do not seem to have an equal sensitivity toward the kinds of cultural imperialism that occurred at the Cairo and Beijing conferences. The same folks who would loudly object if Aristotle or St. Thomas were taught and upheld as standards for all nations, are busy imposing ideas and practices derived from more recent Western thinkers. Until recently a system worked out by a nineteenth-century German was an active intellectual and political force in many nations of the world, often zealously championed by the same types of people who have lately taken up the cause of multiculturalism. They never seem to have noticed that Marx was just as much a dead European male as Cicero or St. Thomas. And lately other equally

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European thinkers, such as Nietzsche or Heidegger, have taken Marx's place as the chief sources of the West's intellectual exports.¹⁷ But the reason for this inconsistency and blindness on the part of the promoters of today's intellectual errors is the same reason that Catholics have never hesitated to convey the Gospel to every nation. For Catholics never believed, and rightly so, that to induce men of other nations to embrace the Faith was in any way a diminution of those others' humanity. Whatever in the traditions of other nations and peoples was most sound would be confirmed, not supplanted, by receiving the Catholic faith. As St. Paul said to the Athenians, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you," proceeding after that to quote favorably from the literature of their own religious traditions (Acts 17:23 & 28). It seems so obvious as to require no argument, that it is never a violation of a man's own culture for him to recognize truth and incorporate that truth into his own traditions. And so it is with the promoters of worldwide birth control, abortion, sexual license and related deformations of human nature, or even of promoters of worldwide capitalism and destructive technology. They too assume that what they have to offer can and must be incorporated into every culture. Though many of these promoters might deny the concept of objective truth, nevertheless they subconsciously hold that liberal secularism is objectively true.¹⁸ Therefore they do not hesitate to seek to extend liberalism's reign throughout the world.¹⁹ They hate anything that stands in its way, any notion that some divine or otherwise objective prohibition should block their progress in assaulting the very foundations of the human person, liberalism's latest project, for having overturned, over the course of several centuries, the traditions of Christian economic restraint that prevailed in the Middle Ages, and having secularized the political order, they now attack the human person directly. But we should remember that this perverse ardor could have arisen nowhere but in the West, for in no other place did there arise a crusading zeal to go into "the highways and hedges, and *compel* people to come in . . ." (Luke 14:23).

Turning from the world to the Church, and recognizing that in the former the West is busy about an anti-mission, what can we say about the genuine mission of the West? Is the vocation to preach the Faith now finished? Now that the Gospel has been preached throughout most of the world, and the Church, to some degree, established in most places, in fact, when missionaries are being sent from Africa to the West, can we say that the West still has a distinctive task in the Church? Or is its

mission over? Of course, much of the Church still depends on material aid from Europe and North America, and the See of Rome will always be the primal and universal see and the focal point of the Church. But now that the Gospel has gone out via Europe to the whole world, what is Europe's mission? We certainly cannot deny the possibility that Western culture will someday recover its Christian heritage (for God is omnipotent), but without indulging in speculations on that point, what can we say of the present situation? It seems to me that this question can be divided into two parts: in the first place, what is the relationship of Catholics outside the West to the concrete fact of historic Christendom, and secondly, what should be the relation of those same Catholics to contemporary Western Catholics?

As to the first part of the question, even though the West has abandoned its vocation, we must not forget that over the centuries a Christian civilization was constructed in the West and that this civilization still exists as a historical fact or record. That is, its thought, its literature, its art and music, its architecture still exist and, it seems to me, surely have some significance for today's Catholics, even those outside the West. For as an incarnation of Christendom, Europe and its overseas extensions were both a necessary physical base from which to carry the Gospel to all the nations, but more importantly, they were a spiritual and intellectual base, a place where the Faith and its implications could be considered at leisure – the leisure of nearly two thousand years. This spiritual and intellectual tradition, like the Europe that spawned it, exists for the entire Catholic world. The centuries of meditation and reflection that Catholic thought underwent in the West are doubtless to be the foundation for the centuries of meditation and reflection that Catholic thought may well undergo outside the West. In fact, what the West received from the original proclamation of the Gospel and thereafter developed in two millennia of contemplation of truth, is a rich mine which new Catholic cultures cannot afford to neglect, and which will serve as the beginning and basis for their own contemplation of Catholic truth.

Very obviously the theological, philosophical, even literary and artistic, expressions of Catholic faith will be of interest to non-Western Catholics. But there is another aspect of the development of Catholicism in Europe that I think must also be carefully looked at. This was the original and ongoing inculturation of the Faith into Europe and later into the overseas colonies of Europe, that is, into those places which were eventually incorporated into Western culture, such as Latin America.

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There is much interest today in the inculturation of Catholicism in Africa and Asia. And it seems to me that this interest is quite proper. But it also seems to me that as the Church takes up the question of inculturation, that the earlier and successful inculturation into Europe should always be before our eyes as a model – not, indeed, as a model to be slavishly copied, for conditions and circumstances today are very different, but as a model which might be able to furnish us with much useful material for our consideration and sometimes for our use. Moreover, the inculturation into Europe, while I think definitely successful, can also show us things to avoid and things that might have been done better.

The spiritual and intellectual heritage of Christian Europe is obviously closely connected with the successful inculturation of the Faith on that continent. Both in fact reveal aspects of the same thing: the Faith as a concrete thing, actually lived, and lived not just on the level of individuals and families, but the Faith as shaping, though imperfectly, an entire society, including its political, economic and artistic works. Whenever we consider, for example, the type of social order sketched in papal writings, it is good to look also at the only example we have had of a living Catholic civilization in operation. For all its faults, Europe and its extensions do give us an example, often as much to be criticized as to be copied, but nevertheless an example that should inspire us to build new civilizations that attempt to incorporate Christ and his teachings into every department of life. It is easy to find fault with the Middle Ages and with later manifestations of Catholic culture, but it is a harder thing to sink the roots of Christian conduct as deeply into ordinary life as did the creators of the original Christendom. If we ignore the good they did, then we are being false to our faith, for Catholicism always seeks to hallow the life and culture in which it dwells. Just because they were not entirely successful does not mean they did not create many things worthy of our admiration and even of our imitation.

The second part of my question concerned the relationship between Catholics outside Western civilization and their contemporary coreligionists of the West. Does the West's position as the original source through which the Faith came dictate any special sort of relationship in this case? Well, in the first place, there is one way in which Western Catholics continue in the tradition of their missionary ancestors – but perversely. This is to propagate dissent throughout the Catholic world, a dissent that is of the same order as the intellectual, cultural and moral poison that the secular West distributes far and wide in the world, and of which I spoke above. But though this promotion of heresy is, like its secular counterpart, a kind of ghost of authentic evangelical and

missionary zeal, it clearly is not something which is a genuine fruit of the West's original vocation. So leaving this dissent aside, what can we say of the relation between Catholics of the West and Catholics elsewhere?

In the first place, the historic fact of Christendom, its theology and philosophy and all its other learning and Christian life, is equally available to everyone. Western Christians can claim no special charism to interpret it correctly nor to exemplify it in life. Catholics from Africa can read the Fathers and Doctors just as well as Catholics from Europe or the Americas. And since this is the case, they can interact directly with the historic reality of Christendom. Whatever meditations or reflections may arise in their minds because of this, are their own contributions to the Church, a contribution each part of the Church can make based on its continuing contact with God and with the living body of Christian thought and experience. Any special – in the sense of superior or guiding – role for Western Christians has now passed. Our own theological insights draw from the same well as is available to everyone else.

Moreover, as the meditation upon the body of historic Christendom continues to take place in the Church outside the Western world, I think that we may expect fruit from it which might be signally helpful to Catholics of the West. For the original proclamation of the Gospel and the life and thought of Catholic Europe for many centuries presupposed something which hardly exists in any but the most isolated parts of the West today. It presupposed a real social life, that is, a community life in which men interacted with one another according to natural occurrences, a life which our out-of-control technology has largely destroyed. It doubtless sounds trite to speak of a life lived more in accordance with nature – but the nature here spoken of is primarily human nature. If grace is to find the natural foundation which is normal for it, then we can hardly ignore those ways of life and traditions which may be termed simply human, nor would their recovery be without value for theology and philosophy. They were part of the soil on which the original seed of the Gospel was sowed, and if Catholics outside the West can make us aware of them again, that would be a boon to the Church greater than most that could occur.

Whether true Western civilization revives or not, its vocation to a large extent was successfully completed. Even though the Church militant is currently in a weakened state, the incarnation of Christ's

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Mystical Body in the world is no longer confined to one region, but has spread throughout the earth. This was the original goal, pronounced by our Lord just before his Ascension, and Europe and the other lands of the West were means toward that end. And because the establishment of the Church and of Catholic civilization was not to be a merely superficial or external thing – something that does not radically affect a culture – Europe was not merely a physical base. It was also a sustained meditation on Catholic truth, a sustained meditation on the Incarnation.²⁰ This meditation is now open to all the members of the Mystical Body in all nations, and we can expect the fruit of the inner life of God that animates the Church to continue to develop this meditation, whatever future events may be, to the praise of the Holy Trinity and the honor of God's Mother. This would not have been possible without Europe, without the West. And however short Western culture may have fallen from its vocation of creating an ideal Christian city, it was nonetheless the concrete historical Christendom which did enable the Gospel to be preached to every creature. This should allow us to look at the West in history with both sorrow and satisfaction – sorrow at what was not done and at the many opportunities missed, yet with some little satisfaction that up to a point its vocation was lived. What else God may create in history, we can only watch and wait.

NOTES

¹ Published here for the first time.

² “It was in Greece alone that philosophy achieved her autonomy and was explicitly distinguished from religion.” Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (London : Sheed and Ward, 1947), p. 33.

³ I say “European civilization,” as simply a synonym for Western civilization, because the chief locus of Western culture has always been Europe. But one should remember that for most of its history the West has been geographically greater than Europe. Especially in antiquity and the early Middle Ages, many of the most productive parts of the West were in Asia and Africa, and many of the most characteristically Western writers, such as Tertullian, Athanasius and Augustine, lived and worked outside of Europe. In the late Middle Ages the West again began to include lands outside of Europe, so that since the 15th century Latin America, and later North America, as well as outposts such as the Philippines, Australia and

New Zealand, have also been parts of that culture or civilization which had its original focus in Europe.

⁴ In *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. II, (San Francisco : Ignatius, c. 1986), p. 369.

⁵ Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, vol. I, *Greece and Rome*, pt. II, (Garden City, NY : Image, new rev. ed., 1962), p. 171.

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* in *Collected Works*, vol. II, p. 369.

⁷ “the small Hellenic race . . . may be truly termed the organ of the reason and word of man as the Jewish people was the organ of the revelation and word of God.” Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, p. 33.

⁸ Roman law is an offspring of the Greeks in the sense that Greek philosophy enabled the Romans to look at law systematically and begin to create a true science of law.

⁹ Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, (Garden City, N.Y. : Image, 1958), p. 224.

¹⁰ However, one should remember that a few Catholics did live outside the lands of Western culture. A number of the Apostles went east on their mission of preaching the Gospel to every creature, and there existed numerous early communities of Christians outside the Empire, for example, in Persia and India. These last, especially, were completely separated from classical civilization in both its Latin and Greek forms. Later, during the Middle Ages, there existed Christian communities, some Catholic, some heretical, as far east as China, as well as the Monophysite Christian empire of Ethiopia. Though these Christian outposts outside the ambit of Western culture can be considered of negligible importance as far as the development of Christendom or Christian thought is concerned, I note their existence simply to point out that from the beginning there have always been Christians outside the West, but perforce part of their own Christian culture.

¹¹ “...the Averroistic tradition forms an uninterrupted chain from the Masters of Arts of Paris and Padua, to the ‘Libertins’ of the seventeenth

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and of the eighteenth centuries.” Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York : Charles Scribner’s, c. 1938), p. 65.

¹² This term, as used in Walt Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth* (Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed., 1971), p. 4, describes not just primitive cultures, but the high civilizations of classical antiquity, China, India and medieval Europe, indeed all human cultures up to the flowering of the intellectual and scientific revolutions in 18th century England. Rostow defines it thus: “A traditional society is one whose structure is developed within limited production functions, based on pre-Newtonian science and technology, and on pre-Newtonian attitudes toward the physical world. Newton is here used as a symbol for that watershed in history when men came widely to believe that the external world was subject to a few knowable laws, and was systematically capable of productive manipulation.”

¹³ Robert Spaemann, quoted in Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe?* (San Francisco : Ignatius, 1994), p. 127.

¹⁴ “If Europe does not export its faith, the faith that – as Nietzsche puts it – ‘God is the truth, that the truth is divine,’ then it inevitably exports its lack of faith, that is, the conviction that there is no truth and no justice and that the good does not exist . . .” Robert Spaemann, quoted in Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe?*, p. 141.

¹⁵ Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (New York : Macmillan, 1973), p. 28. This work is based on lectures originally delivered in 1926.

¹⁶ In a sense, whatever unity Paganism has was produced by the West. For example, it can be questioned whether the entire notion of Hinduism was not simply created by the entrance of outsiders into India. Before that there were simply the religions of India, various religious stories and rites that coexisted in a certain geographical area and mutually influenced each other. By giving a name to this multitude of customs and tales, the Moslems originally, later the Europeans, willy-nilly bestowed on it a certain unity. But in fact, it is as untrue to talk of the religion of Hinduism as it would be to talk of a religion of classical paganism, as if the Greeks or Romans had a religious system with clearly defined dogmas, setting their beliefs sharply apart from others. “. . . the mass of religious phenomena that we shelter under the umbrella of that term [i.e. Hinduism], is not a unity and does not aspire to be.” Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York : Mentor, 1964), p. 63. It is a misunderstanding to see any Paganism in the same way as we see Catholicism.

Islam, of course, does have a creed, and thus is a universal and missionary faith with a desire to convert the world. But that is because Islam was derived from Christianity and from Judaism.

¹⁷ Today there are actually two currents in the intellectual exports of the West. One is in the tradition of such thinkers as John Locke and Adam Smith; the other in that of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Both are equally an anti-Gospel.

¹⁸ I say this loosely, for it is not clear what liberalism actually holds by way of content. What liberalism teaches differs from generation to generation, but it is always hostile to any religious tradition held as true.

¹⁹ I should point out that, of course, liberalism here does not mean the liberal political position as that is used in U.S. politics. It means the entire movement in Western civilization which, since the 17th century, has been hostile to Christian culture. Both American conservatism and American liberalism are themselves varieties of this liberalism.

²⁰ The concept of Western culture being itself a meditation on the Catholic faith I owe to Thomas Molnar.

FAITH AND CULTURE¹

The other evening I was listening to a folk music show on one of the local National Public Radio stations. There was a very interesting interview with a Native American musician who had been taken as a youth from his home on a reservation to a Bureau of Indian Affairs school. At this school Indians from numerous tribes were mixed together, forcing the pupils to communicate in English, since they did not understand each other's native tongues. The musician also told how the government authorities on the reservation forbade anyone younger than fifty to take part in the traditional Indian dances. The point of all this, he said over and over, was to destroy their culture.

The concept of destruction of culture, cultural genocide, is something one hears a fair amount about today, though the fact of it has unfortunately been with us for centuries. From the efforts of Antiochus Epiphanes to wipe out Jewish culture in the first century B.C. to the partially successful English attempts to rob the Irish of their culture to our own treatment of Native Americans, it is a sad part of mankind's story.

Now it is easy to see why it is wrong to steal a man's house or his farm or any of his goods. But why is it a crime to steal his culture? Have you really taken anything from him which matters? I think so, and in order to understand why, it is necessary to look a bit at the place culture has, and necessarily has, in our lives.

Culture is the distinct way that a society, be it a nation or a tribe, lives. It includes how they make their pots and their barns as well as their songs and their tales. Without a culture a man is a poor naked thing, a weak two-legged mammal. That is, looked at in isolation, without a culture and a society, a man is a creature devoid of meaning, because devoid of anything that exemplifies our specific nature as *rational* animals. To live as a human, one could almost say, to *be* human, we must do all the various acts which require a culture. What is our choice of food to be, our type of cookware, the kind of house we will live in, the music we will make, and upon which instruments, indeed, the very words we will speak? All these distinctively human things bespeak a culture – we avoid having a culture only by avoiding performing human actions, almost, if that were possible, by avoiding being human. A naked man shivering on a rock, as soon as he clothes himself and begins to build shelter starts

to create a culture. Without a culture he is hardly a man. But of course there is much more than that. Over the course of the centuries we have created complex cultures with long traditions. Each of them is joined not only with a particular human group, but usually with a particular piece of the earth. The type of dwelling we make depends in part on the climate and the materials available, for example, so that a culture is rooted in both people and land. So to deprive someone of his culture is to pull him from his particular way of being human, to, in a sense, make him the naked man on top of the rock, in the hope of forcing him to adopt the culture of his oppressors and conquerors.

This is why not only *a* culture, but *one's own* culture is important. It is our specific way of expressing our humanity. But it also must be recognized that cultural mores are not absolutes, and that they may contain elements which, instead of aiding man in establishing and expressing his real humanity, hinder that. False religions, false philosophies, false moralities – all these debase a culture and need to be corrected. But even when this is done, a culture will still be itself. Catholic life is not the same in Germany as in Mexico nor need it be the same in Zambia or Japan. A culture can be purified without being destroyed.

If this is the case, though, it follows that religion and morality have an important place in culture. And in fact, many cultural practices are outward expressions of religious or philosophical beliefs. The way we build our houses, for example, can be a big influence on whether we encourage large families or make them something only the heroic will undertake. The design of neighborhoods or apartment buildings can encourage community or make it unlikely anyone will ever discover who lives next door. The system of property ownership and marketing of produce can encourage economic stability, justice, and cooperation or it can encourage ruthless competition and perpetual economic discord. Our customs of courtship can encourage chastity and healthy marriages or make fornication and subsequent adultery more likely. The thing to note, however, is that different cultures have different arrangements for such things because of what the cultures and societies *believe* and *think*. For example, in the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta all the institutions of daily life – the harsh education of boys, men living apart from their families in military barracks, prohibition of foreign travel – were for the sake of creating a formidable military machine, because the

rulers of Sparta were convinced that this was what was good for their state. The militaristic *ideas* of the rulers found concrete formulation in militaristic cultural practices. Likewise, capitalism and industrialism arose in Protestant not in Catholic Europe, because they were more akin to the Protestant ethos than to the Catholic. Now if this is the case, we have to ask ourselves about our own cultural practices and what ideas they embody. Do they reflect the Catholic faith that we profess or some alien set of beliefs?

We who live in English-speaking North America necessarily live in the midst of a largely secularized Protestant culture. Everything in our public culture, from attitudes toward Sunday, toward gambling, toward drinking, toward moneymaking, toward the family, toward work, were originally formed by Protestantism and are now modified by secularism. But if we are Catholics, if we really believe the Faith, then we obviously will try, as much as possible, to make our outward lives reflect our beliefs as Catholics. Even in matters that are not sin, we will want to live a Catholic life, that is, to live out a Catholic culture. And for the time being, we can do that most successfully within the family and within small groups, since we have very little influence on the larger public culture.

One way we can do this is in the matter of sacred time. How a culture organizes time is very important. In their efforts to root out all Christian consciousness from the Russian people, the Soviets made an early and unsuccessful attempt to replace the seven-day week in order to eradicate the concept of Sunday. Likewise the French Revolution abolished our familiar months and began renumbering the years from the Revolution beginning with Year One. In a less radical way we can see that the official civic culture of the United States also desires to organize time. As I write, we are approaching Thanksgiving Day, a day meant for thanksgiving to Almighty God, yet – is this not strange? – initiated by the public authorities, not the Church, in fact a secular civic holy day. And, of course, there are other titles that name other days: New Years Day, Martin Luther King Day, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and many others. We even have Jefferson Davis's birthday (June 3) and Wright Brothers Day (December 17). If you are interested, look in your almanacs and you will probably find a civic celebration for nearly every day of the year. And what do these days teach us?

They teach, I think, that our life is bounded by the state and by this life. The heroes who are honored in them served the nation, or at least we thought they did, contributed to its industrial progress or its land grabbing or to some other aspect of its history. They teach us that duty to the state is our whole duty and this duty is accomplished entirely in this world. By saying that this day is the Fourth of July or Veterans' Day they assert that the community of Americans is the most important community to which we belong, the one that is primary in our lives. We receive holidays from work and take part in public celebrations (as our Thanksgiving turkey or our fireworks) only according to this schedule. Any other is at best supplementary and private and at worst a competitor to be driven underground. (In fact, one could argue that the secular American calendar has banished the notion of the Church year with its progression of holy days from the consciousness of Catholics much more effectively than the French or Russian revolutionaries and their reformulations of the calendar ever did.)

Perhaps some readers might have thought of one holiday that was not created by the State authorities, and yet is given full honors by our society. This, of course, is Christmas. But what of it? It should be clear that the general official North American celebration of Christmas has nothing to do with God become man, with the fact that Almighty God himself could now be touched, held, played with, suckled, not to mention, spat upon, whipped and killed. It is simply a winter festival presided over by an elf named Santa Claus, who has absolutely no living connection with the holy bishop of Myra.

According to the Church's calendar, Christmas begins on the evening of December 24 and extends for a period of days. Preceding Christmas comes Advent, a time of preparation for the celebration of the birth of our Lord. It hardly need be said that this preparation does not primarily mean the buying of gifts and suchlike, but rather the preparation of our souls for the Holy Infant.

Now, in the *public* culture of North America, Christmas begins to be celebrated sometime in November. Store displays may be put up even earlier. Christmas parties and the like are often held in early December. The "Christmas spirit" is certainly fully present by mid-December, and builds up to a climax on December 25, when it suddenly disappears. But what about the Church? She is just beginning her celebration. But who is celebrating? Are her children among those who have observed Advent, who have refrained from holding and attending parties before

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the evening of the 24th, who are now in a proper state of soul and mind to rejoice? Or are her children, equally with the secularists, among those who are already sick of Christmas, jaded, happy to toss out the tree and buckle down to the next holiday, New Year's Eve? That many Catholic schools and other organizations hold Christmas celebrations during Advent shows that they lack the minimum understanding of how culture expresses faith. Of course, there are all sorts of good reasons why they must make that compromise – people will be away for the holidays, etc., but they all make about as much sense as celebrating Easter on Good Friday because someone will be out of town on Sunday. Those who do so proclaim that for them faith is separate from culture and is something that hardly affects their lives. They are so unwilling or afraid to depart from our culture's customs and dictates, that they would rather ignore what Holy Church is doing. She may patiently await the coming of the Lord during Advent and rejoice afterwards. *They* will stubbornly try to rejoice before and sit around in disgust or boredom afterwards.

To create or recreate an authentic Catholic subculture, we must more or less ignore the culture around us, including its observance of what it calls Christmas. One important and necessary way to do this is to observe the Church's real cycle of feasts and fasts. The calendar was never meant to be something observed merely within the church building for liturgical purposes only. The fact that this tends to be the case in countries of Protestant culture, such as the United States, indicates that there is something lacking in our Catholicity. It does not permeate our life, especially our public and corporate life. Too often it does not even noticeably affect our family life. But for those Catholics who recognize that culture is the outward sign of Faith, and who know that the Church's year must reign supreme outside the sanctuary, there is much that can still be done. Unlike those who live in countries of traditional Catholic culture, we have few public acknowledgments of sacred times. Our secular world does not blink an eye for the feast of our Lord's Ascension or of our Blessed Lady's Assumption or Immaculate Conception, let alone the patronal feast of our parish or town. But if we are to be faithful Catholics, then it is right for us, as much as we conveniently can, to observe these feasts. Within families, apostolic groups, a neighborhood here and there, things *can* be done. For starters, we can have a real Christmas party, i.e, a party sometime between the evening of December 24 and the Epiphany. And, of course, refuse, as much as is consistent

with charity or the demands of your job, to attend Christmas parties that desecrate Advent. Be militant. Do not conform. Make the true Faith and its expression the most important thing.

For those families and groups with the time to do more, there are books that suggest ways to observe the well-known and lesser-known feasts of the Church year. There are more than one of these and they can be located through Catholic bookstores and mail-order firms. But even without a book, one can easily come up with many practices, ranging from dressing up and having a party for carnival (night before Ash Wednesday), to lighting an Advent wreath during family prayers in Advent.

Parents might well decide also to observe their own and their children's name days (that is, the feast day of the saint after whom they were named), as is traditional in Catholic regions. This is perfectly feasible in a family, and can either be in addition to, or instead of, observance of birthdays. This could be done in Catholic schools too, but alas, how few pastors, principals or teachers are aware that the Faith is something to be lived in a corporate as well as in an individual manner.

Some might think that because the Church is in such a mess we should concentrate just on getting people to believe the Creeds and observe the basics of God's law. But I do not think this is so. Certainly the Creeds and the Commandments are primary, but if the full practice of the Faith is to spread, then it must be practiced in its fullness. We can not wait for the problems in the Church to be solved (they will never be entirely solved anyway) to begin our own small efforts at restoring Catholic life. We must do whatever we can to make our lives and our families integrally Catholic. And if we strive for that, at the same time striving for that holiness without which no man will see God, then, with confidence in God's Mother, we can expect our life both here and hereafter to be filled with God and to reflect him forever.

NOTES

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[4]

LATIN AND THE REVIVAL OF CATHOLIC CULTURE¹

Lord, let it alone this year also,
until I dig about it, and dung it.

Luke 13:8 (Douay-Rheims version)

I

In the Western world today most intellectuals, especially those noticed by the official cultural and media organs of society, are implacable enemies of any kind of supernatural outlook on existence, and especially are they enemies of any form of Christianity. This hostility on the part of most intellectuals is so intense that it almost justifies the opinion that some people seem to have, namely that *all* intellectuals by their very nature are opposed to religious faith.² But even though this is not the case, it still is so rare that it is refreshing to find a situation where a large number of intellectuals support religion and are open to the supernatural. Let us look at some intellectuals of another religion, Islam. The following are positions held by the *moderate* faculty members of Cairo University in Egypt:

university students should voluntarily adopt more religiously oriented standards and behavior. Women . . . should wear the Islamic head scarf, and men and women should sit on opposite sides of lecture halls.

[Such academics believe] Egypt has tried too hard to imitate the West and benefited too little from those efforts . . . University social-sciences curricula in Egypt should be changed . . . “to be closer to our culture.”³

The views of these Egyptian intellectuals are examples of the revival of religion that is occurring throughout the Islamic world. These are the more moderate adherents of the Islamic revival, but the more extreme

supporters of the movement are better known to us. In this connection one thinks of the Ayatollah Khomeini, assassinations, political repression and the like. My point in bringing up this subject is to note the interesting phenomenon of a movement of traditional religion, with both popular and intellectual support, battling secularism in government and society. The secularism of nearly all well-known intellectuals in the West makes one wonder by what means more Western intellectuals might be brought to support a revival of traditional Catholicism in Europe or the Americas. In any case, let us see how the Islamic revivalists themselves describe how they go about their work.

The normal evolution of Islamic revival would begin with an intellectual phase where classical literature is rediscovered, where contemporary writings proliferate, and then small groups will start organizing and working for Islam.

It is only when the movement has matured that it would develop a popular dimension . . .⁴

The Islamic revivalists regard their task as the renewal of an Islam that has become too static and is no longer the important social and public force that it should be.

As opposed to the dormant traditional Islamic society, which is oblivious to religion except as private practice, this renewed spirit of Islam is represented by a sharper consciousness of identity, a revived faith, a reformed personal and social conduct . . . and increased sociopolitical activism seeking to close the gap that separates the condition of Muslim society and its ideas of Islam.⁵

Islam, of course, is not the true religion, but is there anything here that we Catholics could emulate or at least from which we could learn? Can we perhaps dig about and put on dung in hopes of bringing the tree of our religious and cultural patrimony to bear fruit, say, rediscover our own classical literature as the Islamic revivalists are rediscovering theirs? Let us look at this question in more detail.

It is possible to be a more or less devout Catholic and yet be largely untouched by immense elements of what Catholic tradition has created in the world. Especially today, with the Mass in the vernacular, with hymns rarely older than 30 years, with traditional devotions abandoned, one can be a Catholic and yet cut off from and unaware of what the Church and Catholic civilization have created over many centuries at great cost and

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with great love. Although simply in order to be an orthodox Catholic one must reject, at least intellectually, very much of what contemporary culture offers us, still one can hold the Faith and live largely within modern culture. Of course, this is an uneasy and precarious situation, but yet many people are living in such a way. For unfortunately even most orthodox Catholics do not understand how much of modern culture must be rejected if Catholic life is to be preserved and restored. It is not just obvious crimes and sins against the commandments that are implicated in the decline of Catholic life. But if one comes to realize this, and wishes to dig down and cultivate Catholic life, what is he to do? Obviously his interior life, his relationship with Almighty God and with the things of God, holds the central place. On that, however, there are others better qualified to speak than I am. But is there more? Is there more to a renewal of Catholic life than a deepened spiritual life? In fact, there is an entire Catholic intellectual, liturgical and, in short, cultural and social, tradition or heritage which belongs to us, and which, if we are serious about being Catholics, we must attempt to make our own. If we do not do this, then we are for the most part cut off by time within the prison of the last 30 years or so, for our liturgy, our devotional life, our literature and reading, our entire intellectual and cultural outlook will be formed without reference to what Catholicism has historically created in the world. We sentence ourselves to a shallow and insubstantial Catholic life if we neglect the riches that the Faith has handed down to us.

Catholic cultural and intellectual life has existed for nearly two thousand years. Are we, the small portion of Catholics in the late 20th century, somehow to be exempt from having a living contact with those of the Faith who went before us? To ignore them and all that they did is to live only on the surface of Catholicism. Some people might think that this is of no concern to themselves. They are not saints or intellectuals, so why should they care about all of this? The answer to that is that all of us, whether we are saints or intellectuals or not, have an eternal destiny and all of us have intellects. If we do not nourish our spiritual lives and our thinking (and all of us must think) with Catholic truth, then we will nourish them with contemporary fads and fashions.

In the past the Church's fasting and abstinence regulations, for example, ensured that every Catholic observed the necessary minimum of penance. There were many prescribed days of fast or abstinence, not to mention the entire season of Lent, with sometimes detailed rules for

keeping them. Today the obligation to fast or abstain is still present. For instance, abstinence from meat is still prescribed for every Friday in the year (canon 1251), *unless* one's bishops conference has determined otherwise. Here in the United States our bishops have indeed determined otherwise, so that we may substitute our own works of penance or charity or piety in place of abstinence from meat. But some such works are obligatory on Fridays and "Substantial observance of the laws of fast and abstinence is a matter of serious obligation."⁶ But because this is such a well kept secret, hardly anyone does anything special on Fridays. We are left instead to dwell entirely within the confines of a culture that has no conception of penance and whose motto for Fridays is TGIF, which is always an excuse for a party. The fact that Christ our God died for us on that day is so far outside the realm of consciousness as to seem to come from another planet.

My point in bringing this matter up here is that the pre-1967 detailed apparatus of rules for doing penance, though doubtless needing to be reformed and simplified, was intended to make present in each Catholic's life something of the age-old Christian tradition of doing penance, to lift him above our current culture's ignorance and avoidance of anything resembling penitential acts. The same is true of the Latin Mass. The Church's use of the Latin language and of Gregorian chant, however poorly it was done in some places, made present to every worshiper some modicum of our Christian heritage. Every Catholic of the Latin rite was made aware by this use of Latin that there was something about the Church and about the cult and culture of offering sacrifice to Almighty God that was bigger than his own personal religious sensibilities and even of the combined sensibilities of his own generation. The Mass did something without any analogue in our own culture: it created a time and a space and an action devoted by their very nature solely to the worship of God. It represented just a bit of an escape from the oppressive mass culture of modernity, and in intention, however far from achievement it no doubt was in many parishes, gave an opportunity to partake of a true Christian culture, something which in itself conduces to the proper worship of Almighty God.

Similarly, before the mid-1960s there was some notion that other things from the past were valuable. Thus the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius or age-old pilgrimages or other popular devotions carried into the present something of the immense wealth which the Church has

bestowed on her children.⁷ The rules of religious institutes, the very habits their members wore, gave a witness that there was something worthwhile beyond the bounds of the culture of the end of the 20th century. However poorly individual Catholics may have appreciated it, the Church was making present part of her living and continuing tradition in these various customs and institutions. The gifts that each generation gives to the Church (or more properly that God gives to the Church in each generation) are not meant for that time alone, but are to be carried on for the support and nourishing of all who come after.

Some might say that it is proper for the Church to update her worship and life to keep pace with the times, to become all things to all men, as St. Paul wished to do. And in fact the Church has always done this. But this is not the same thing as to imprison ourselves in a tiny portion of human history, as we do today. Within the bounds of reality as understood and mediated by the culture of modernity, there is no room for anything contemplative, no room for anything even that links us with our past. Shopping malls, modern music of all kinds, advertisements, entertainment, sports – do any of these even hint that there is more to the world or to life than living and consuming after the fashion of late 20th century man? One of the most noxious things about the contemporary youth culture is the narrow boundaries it sets for its denizens. The range of acts, experiences, choices, motives, fulfillments which it presents, glamorizes and validates are chiefly those which will promote a life of consumerism, for mass culture, above all, is a culture based on the conversion of the economic process into a process for unloading unlimited quantities of goods, many useless or harmful, on a willing public. This public has been rendered willing, however, not just by advertising, but by the creation of an entire culture dedicated only to buying, using, throwing away and buying again. Those who inhabit solely the youth culture can only with difficulty *see* that there is any kind of life other than this one. Only with difficulty can they see that sex is something other than a means for instant gratification and exploitation, all to the accompaniment of the latest fads in clothes and music. Often the inhabitants of such a culture are not even blameworthy – they have just never encountered the notion of sex as part of a complex of acts and relations situated around a stable and fruitful marriage and part of a grand order reaching from God through the angels to man and even beyond. A culture whose horizons are thus limited needs something imported from another age if contemplation and adoration – or even sanity – are to be parts of it.

Of course, this introduction of elements from another age does not mean that that age, say the Middle Ages, was perfect or that we accept every aspect of its spirituality, liturgy, etc. without further ado. Everything, every practice or mode of doing things in God's Church is necessarily first incarnated at one time or place. To use such is not to rate its time or place as exactly and in every way suitable for us now. Instead, since we are part of the Mystical Body of Christ extending in both time and space, and indeed beyond time and space, we have to be linked with our brothers of other ages, since Catholic wisdom is deposited in the Church in every age. Thus we can bring certain cultural features from another age, as the Latin Mass, without thereby denying the truth that our age has its own unique needs and insights and that the methods of the apostolate must necessarily change as time goes on. What we should be doing, I think, is not trying to pretend that we can be a carbon copy of the 13th or the 17th century, but simply recognizing that no one age has in itself all the cultural qualities that man needs. And that some ages may be more lacking in certain qualities than others. Moreover, I am not so much advocating a policy of going back, as rather of digging down. We cannot be reactionaries, still less merely conservatives. The immense richness of Catholic life and thought is waiting for us to plumb and mine. This is not the same as standing still for the sake of standing still or even reaching back for the sake of reaching back. It is rather nourishing ourselves on the unbelievable riches that in every era God has deposited for us in his Church and in the civilization made by that Church.

II

To revive Catholic life it is necessary to revive entire Catholic peoples, even the entire Catholic world. Before exploring that theme, let me draw a distinction between the Catholic people, considered as a cultural whole, and the Church or the members of the Church.⁸ They are the same persons, the Catholic people and the members of the Church, but they may be looked at from different viewpoints. In scholastic terminology, they have the same material object but different formal objects. On the one hand, the collective Catholics of the world comprise the Church militant, the Mystical Body of Christ on earth, and are

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organized under the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ, and are hierarchically governed by the Pope and the bishops, divided into rites, dioceses, parishes, etc., and profess the same Faith and receive the same sacraments for the sake of their sanctification and salvation. These same individuals, on the other hand, also constitute the Catholic people, and as such are organized politically, socially and culturally, and express their Faith in actual cultural creations, using *culture* here in its widest and anthropological sense (in Christopher Dawson's words, "a common way of life").⁹ Moreover, this political, social and cultural organization of the Catholic people ought to be Catholic, for Catholicism is meant to pervade a social order, and to create or alter its political and cultural structures so that they express in their own way the truths of the Faith, especially the supreme fact of the Incarnation of God. How could we go about promoting a Catholic revival among this Catholic people? It is not possible to revive a Catholic society without reviving the Church, for a Catholic culture depends on and reflects the Faith and the liturgy. Nor can a revival of Catholic culture be reduced simply to an intellectual movement, essential though that is. The proximate cause of a true renewal of Catholicism in any place would need to be the preaching of the Faith, the administration of the sacraments and prayer. Therefore there would have to be involvement by the clergy and at least toleration by the bishops. But despite this, an intellectual movement might be able to play an important role in initiating what could later become a more general renewal of both the Church and of Catholic culture. The clergy, including the bishops, are hardly immune to the intellectual atmosphere which surrounds them, and were the atmosphere inside the Church to become more Catholic, were classic Catholic intellectual principles to become more widely known and appreciated, then this would inevitably have some influence on the clergy. An intellectual movement might begin with small study groups, lead to the founding of journals, publishing of books, creation of study centers and institutes – all things that could help supply the necessary intellectual side to any Catholic revival. The incredibly rich treasury of Catholic thought and works needs to become known, to be read, understood, meditated upon, and applied to our time according to its own nature and needs. Of course, some of these things are already being done, but were they done more extensively, and with the particular intention of regaining our Catholic intellectual heritage and promoting the social reign of Christ the King, who knows what might, in time, result?

I am thinking here especially of Catholic countries or other traditional Catholic regions. Only in these places can something like a Catholic social life be lived. Is it too much to hope that Catholic study groups in such places can begin a process which in the end will have some influence on social and cultural life, on the public life of their nation? Even, though this must be understood correctly and undertaken very carefully, on its political life? To begin such a study group is very simple. There are such riches from which to take material, from Catholic theology, philosophy, social teaching, art, music, fiction – it is only a question of investigating who we are, for to understand ourselves we must understand our past and what has constituted us over time. Naturally any Catholic cultural or political movement would need to take great care to promote only authentic Catholicism. There is always a danger in anything having to do with politics, but on the other hand, the political order also must be reclaimed for Christ the King. And it is especially necessary to remember, as John Paul II describes it in *Centesimus*, that “freedom in the economic sector [must be] circumscribed within a strong juridical framework,”¹⁰ for in some places ignorance of true Catholic social teaching has compromised well-intentioned efforts of Catholic action.

III

I touched on the use of Latin in the Roman liturgy earlier in this essay, but I need to say a bit more about this now, for the use of Latin is more important than some might think. The liturgy either subconsciously teaches us that we are linked with the great world of the saints and doctors and mystics of the true Faith, that we are but a small part of the Catholic ages, or instead it teaches us that the superficial and subjective world of the 20th century is the summit of human creativity. Is the atmosphere of the Mass as usually celebrated today one of adoration of Almighty God? Or is it one of glorification of the modern world, because we are subconsciously being taught that we have broken with everything that once defined the Faith and the Church? Are we teaching ourselves that we are no different from the modern world and have nothing to say to it because we dwell entirely within it?

The question of a liturgical language cannot be approached as if in every age we could begin the Church all over again. We must deal with the fact

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that for well over a thousand years Latin was the liturgical language of the Latin rite and an entire religious and devotional culture was built up around it.¹¹ To change this culture, especially in the manner in which it was done, could not help but be damaging to people's faith, for it was no small thing that was done by the liturgical reformers. The celebration of Mass and the administration of the sacraments in Latin were the centers of this liturgical and devotional culture, but there was much more to it: Latin hymns and carols sung outside of church, holy cards with Latin inscriptions, Catholic institutions with Latin names, certain Latin phrases which had gained currency among Catholics, etc. All this had created a way of worshiping that had been passed down for many generations, a way of relating to God and the Church, an atmosphere redolent of the Christian centuries and which was well suited to foster worship and devotion. Now, *had* there been any crucial reasons for doing away with this culture, the proper way would have been to make a few changes one year, a few the next, making a gradual transition over fifty years or so to an entirely vernacular liturgy. But, I maintain, there was no good reason for changing this liturgical culture. Perhaps the liturgy of the Eucharist had grown somewhat too florid and needed a bit of pruning; that, in fact, was what the *Latin* Mass of Paul VI was intended to accomplish. Certainly one can dispute many of the details of the new Mass in Latin, but in most respects, when properly celebrated and using the Roman canon, it is in continuity with the former rite and in itself need hardly have disturbed the culture of worship which was such an important part of the lived experience of being Catholic.¹² Many people who argue in favor of the liturgy in the vernacular seem to think that when the laity can understand the prayers of the Mass this will help in their understanding of the Faith. The abysmal lack of knowledge of their religion among Catholics today ought to be sufficient to refute that argument. In any case, catechetical instruction is the only thing that will teach people the Faith; if such instruction is being done properly we do not need to use the liturgy in this way, but where there is little or no catechesis, a vernacular liturgy will never be able to teach people the content of the Faith.

I suppose many would be inclined to say there was much justice in what I have just written, but that since the liturgy has been changed, since the age-old devotional culture has been destroyed, why trouble ourselves to rebuild it? "Surely you must admit yourself," they might say, "that a liturgy in a largely unknown tongue is not, abstractly speaking, the most desirable. Why return to something that is gone, even if it was done away with unwisely? An entire generation has grown up with a vernacular liturgy; what is the point of going back – even if one could – to the

Latin?" My answer to that, briefly put, is that we cannot escape our past nor is it even healthy psychologically to try to do so. Now let me unpack this last sentence and show what I mean by this.

When people begin to get serious about something, they generally want to investigate its past, to delve deep into its lore. This can be true about things such as hobbies or sports, but it applies even more to what one *is*. Consider how some African Americans, when they begin to take their African heritage seriously, will learn Swahili, adopt what they believe to be African hairstyles and dress, etc. All this is rooted, I think, in the philosophical principle that everything is something, i.e., some definite nature, and a thing is good as far as it conforms to that nature – a thing is good if it is what it is.¹³ Nor is it psychologically healthy to pretend to be other than what one is. To restore the integrity of any thing, one must know what that thing is. Otherwise one is not restoring. One's psychological integrity will not be helped by trying to be something one is not – if an Irish or German Catholic tries to feign that he is a WASP, for example. For Catholics of the Roman rite, Latin is an inescapable part of our history and heritage, even of what we are. And when we Catholics again begin to take seriously what we are, we cannot help running into Latin. In the liturgy, for example, if we come to realize that neither a television talk show nor a rock concert are good models for the celebration of Holy Mass, where can we turn for something better? Now it is true that the Anglicans have, or had, a reverent English liturgy, but why would we look to them? Even if it could be proven that their liturgy was objectively superior to the Roman rite in Latin (a vain effort in my opinion), why would we travel outside our own tradition and history? To enter more deeply into the spirit and meaning of our worship, we would do better to enter more deeply into our own past. And if we do that, if we take even a few steps in that direction, we quickly encounter Latin. But if we are unwilling to accept and make use of that fact, then we willfully trap both the sacred liturgy and our own devotional sense in the cultural triteness of the late 20th century. Our only escape from the banality of a liturgy that too often has the ambience of a dentist's office is to manfully recover our own Latin culture.

Nor is Latin so remote from us as we might think. All one needs to do is scan the titles of recent papal pronouncements to discover that Latin is still very important to the Church. And if we want to learn even a little of her great liturgical and devotional heritage, her riches in theology and philosophy, at least a little Latin becomes a necessity. For

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a Catholic, for one of the Latin rite at any rate, Latin is a fact that cannot be ignored. Even some of the paperback missellettes still print the Latin text of the *Tantum ergo* and the *O Salutaris Hostia* in the back, and many of the hymnals still contain some Latin hymns. Because of her long heritage of Latin the Church is stuck with that language. To ignore it is a little like a man trying to pretend that some trait he has inherited from his ancestors that he considers irksome simply doesn't exist. He would do better to accept it and get on with things. So Catholics would do better to accept their Latin heritage, use it and learn from it. And, of course, it should be obvious that when I say "the Church is stuck with" Latin, I recognize that Latin is not something we should grudgingly acknowledge, but something that, under divine providence, we should thank Almighty God for, a great gift to the Church, a means of passing down from earlier Christian centuries liturgical, theological and philosophical treasures.

Now this renewed use of Latin is for the liturgy, yes, but should go on to encompass a wide knowledge of Latin among the clergy and educated lay Catholics. This renewed use of Latin is necessary if we are really to become linked with the great majority of the Catholic Church, those no longer living, with our fathers in the faith, with all the spirituality and learning which came before us.¹⁴ In an article in 1987 I argued that contemporary Catholics were isolated from one another by linguistic barriers¹⁵ and that the widespread use of Latin was the best means of overcoming these barriers. But now I point out that our linguistic separation is not just from our living brethren, but from our deceased ones as well. Latin is one necessary means to enter into communication with them, to escape from our narrow and provincial world of the late 20th century, not just to read their works with some hope of approaching to their own thoughts, but to carry on their work, using the same words for the same things, knowing that thus the facts and concepts of Christian wisdom will not be distorted or undermined.¹⁶

Those who have studied classical Latin texts as they are usually studied today may be puzzled by my suggestion of a wide use of Latin among educated Catholics. Does not the reading of Latin necessarily call for a laborious reading and rereading of separate clauses, which are then pieced together equally laboriously, with finally perhaps some understanding of the entire sentence? Am I really suggesting that we might learn to read it with ease, even speak or write it? As Fr. George Ganss, S.J., said years ago, in the modern way of learning, Latin is not

so much read as it is decoded.¹⁷ But Latin need not be learned as if every student were to become a classical scholar. Many ecclesiastical works are written in a simpler style, and if we model ourselves on this style it is not too much to hope that we can again begin to read it and even to speak and write it.¹⁸

IV

Today there is considerable talk about the decline of Western culture, both because of the West's virulent rejection of its own heritage and because of its declining birthrate – for example, in Europe, the center of the West, in most countries the birthrate is below the replacement rate. This is a real problem, and one that should concern Western Catholics. But the Church's chief concern must be not with Western civilization but with Christian civilization. Of course, Christian civilization was first incarnated in the West and in fact Western civilization has meaning only *as* a Christian culture. But in fact today it has lost its faith and thus its soul, and who can say what the Holy Spirit will create elsewhere in the world? The question is thus, what new social and cultural forms will the Faith assume and invigorate and what will be their relation with the West's historic Christian culture? Today the West is copied in its most superficial and even noxious features – its noisy technology and noisier music, its fashions in clothes and its secularism, its atomistic economic system and its cult of freedom. But a Christian culture would need to embody other features, those which in particular define a Catholic social order. Without question this would include the theological and philosophical truths which were originally worked out within Western culture, and thus the theological and philosophical means and tools to understand and state such truths. But what more could be taken from what was formerly Christendom? Let me answer that question in this way.

The congregation at the Latin Mass I attended for several years was only about 50% of European stock. Among the rest one saw many with the black skin of Africa, and often wearing traditional African clothes as well, the many hues of east Asia, Filipinos, women in the native dress of India. Since there are hundreds of weekend Masses in the Washington metropolitan area, everyone there was present from choice: a choice to

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reaffirm their Catholic faith in the Latin tongue used by their ancestors for liturgical worship. The Gregorian chant of the ordinary of the Mass, sung in unison by this congregation, is an example of true multiculturalism – the Latin culture of Christendom is allowed to influence and supplement, not supplant, the various Catholic cultures of the world. Just as the folk art of much of Latin America is a beautiful blend of Spanish and Native American traditions, representing a truly new province of Christendom in the New World, Spanish and yet not simply Spain, thoroughly Catholic and yet not simply European, so the Latin Mass can be a means of perfecting the Catholic cultures of Africa, Vietnam, Korea and many other lands. The cultural unity of the Catholic peoples of the world is not the same as their cultural uniformity. And Latin could well stand as the centerpiece of the unity of these cultures, a thread binding them together, yet leaving ample room for individual local language and genius, the particularity that at the same time is universal, since it results from the incarnation in place and time of the Catholic spirit.¹⁹ Whenever we again recover the sense of the supreme importance of being Catholic, of being members of the Mystical Body of Christ, then we can begin to rebuild everything around us in light of that fact. And at that time, I would predict, the richness of the Latin heritage of the Church will be appropriated to enrich all the cultures formed and being formed by Latin Catholics. In this there is no cultural imperialism, only a sharing of what, under the providence of God, is the patrimony of so many in the world. Can we hope, then, that among the other things which new Christendoms will take will be that Latin language which carries with it so much of Christian wisdom? If the fullness of Christian theology and philosophy must be appropriated and retained, how can this be done without the linguistic medium in which it is historically embodied? Both the Latin liturgical and intellectual cultures would seem to be things well worth fighting to preserve for as long as the Church exists on the earth – that is, until our Lord returns to judge and finally save.

If all this is done, then our Faith will nourish itself on its deep roots, roots deep in a soil made fertile not by the gadgets and noise of the 20th century, but by the quiet work of the Catholic ages. Then the Church on earth will show her full face again and, together with the saints in Heaven, rejoice in the worship of the Undivided Trinity and the honor of the Holy Virgin.

NOTES

¹ Parts of this essay were originally published in *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, vol. 96, no. 8, May 1996, under the title “Latin and the Recovery of the Catholic Mind.”

² For example, in an issue of *Catalyst*, the newsletter of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, a writer begins his article, “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the happiest of them all? Not the intellectuals, that’s for sure. Indeed, they’re probably the most miserable.” (June 1994, p. 14) Apparently orthodox Catholic intellectuals do not exist. For a member of the Church that boasts such saintly intellectuals as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas More, Cardinal Newman and G. K. Chesterton, to write like this seems a bit strange to me. Why does ‘intellectual’ so easily become a term of abuse, even by those who do not really mean it? In response to such writing one wants to cry out, “Distinguo!”

³ *Chronicle of Higher Education*, vol. 40, no. 37 (May 18, 1994), p. A39, [Interview with Dr. Badr G. Ateya of Cairo University].

⁴ Dr. Hasan A. al-Turabi of the Sudan, testifying before a U.S. Congressional committee. *Islamic Fundamentalism in Africa and Implications for U.S. Policy*, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, May 20, 1992 (Washington : Government Printing Office, 1993), p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶ 1991 *Catholic Almanac*, p. 236, citing Pope Paul VI’s Apostolic Constitution *Paenitemini* (February 17, 1966).

⁷ Of course many of these continue today or have been revived. But they surely play a smaller part in the lives of Catholics than in the past.

⁸ Etienne Gilson expresses a similar thought: “It is enough to speak to a few theologians about Christendom and to observe their spontaneous reactions to it in order to understand how it has come about that we do not as yet have a theology of Christendom. As soon as they are asked for a definition, they reduce it to the notion of the *Church*, without which in fact *Christendom* is incomprehensible. The notion of the Church alone can enable us to establish Christendom on a firm foundation, but there is reason to think that on certain points Christendom is distinguished from the Church.” “Where is Christendom?” in *A Gilson Reader*, edited by Anton C. Pegis (Garden City, N.Y. : Image, 1957), p. 345.

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⁹ “The Sources of Culture Change” in *Dynamics of World History* (La Salle, Ill. : Sherwood Sugden, 1978), p. 4.

¹⁰ Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, no. 42.

¹¹ One can say even more than this: “Concerning the liturgical texts themselves, the implementation of the Council’s directives was a more delicate matter, since what was being laid aside was not a language the Church had borrowed long ago, but a tongue she herself had created for the proper expression of her Faith, and that was the mother tongue of the Christian West.” Henri de Lubac in his commentary on a selection of Etienne Gilson’s letters, *Letters of Etienne Gilson to Henri de Lubac* (San Francisco : Ignatius, c. 1988), p. 87.

¹² However, in no way do I oppose the use of the traditional Mass – the Tridentine Mass – as entirely suited to and proper for our own age.

¹³ See Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*, I q. 5, art 3.

¹⁴ A Religious News Service press dispatch on Fr. Reginald Foster, a Carmelite, who is in charge of the Vatican’s Latin translation office, says the following: “how can you understand the church’s soul if you can’t speak its language?” ‘It connects you with the continuity of human nature,’ he says. ‘The whole training, the whole education and the whole past is Latin and the whole mentality is Latin. You can’t get around it.’” Printed in the *York Daily Record*, York, Pa., November 11, 1995.

¹⁵ “Catholic Universalism and the Language Question,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, vol. 87, no. 6, March 1987. In this article I also argued that if Latin were not revived another language could be used for world communication among Catholics. I now believe that reviving Latin is the only suitable course for Catholics.

¹⁶ Cf. the Encyclical *Mediator Dei* of Pius XII, where he refers to Latin in the liturgy as “an effective antidote for any corruption of doctrinal truth” para. 60, (Vatican Library translation). This is surely true also of theological and philosophical studies.

¹⁷ See “A Historical Sketch of the Teaching of Latin” in Fr. Ganss’ *St. Ignatius’ Idea of a Jesuit University* (Milwaukee : Marquette University, 1956), pp. 218-258, especially pp. 234-258.

¹⁸ Fr. Suitberthus H. Siedl, O.C.D. and the *Familiae Sancti Hieronymi* are doing much work to restore Latin as a living language. Moreover, as Fr. Siedl points out, the best way to read even *classical* Latin is not by the hunt and snare method taught in most schools.

If I may add a personal note, I have been surprised at the ease of beginning to *speak* simple Latin which I have acquired both from steady reading of texts and from Fr. Siedl's course.

¹⁹ See my article, "The Catholicity of Catholicism" *The Wanderer*, vol. 117, no. 45, November 8, 1984.

*ARS GRATIA ARTIS OR
ARS GRATIA HOMINIS?*¹

Anyone visiting almost any art museum will see exhibited numerous examples of Catholic religious art, which, depending on the museum, might range from late Antiquity to more recent times. A glance at the guidebook or explanation accompanying the picture or sculpture will usually reveal that the art was originally created for use in a church. It was intended to be the normal accompaniment for the sacrifice of the Mass and the other services of the Church. I once visited a wonderful exhibit at the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe of Spanish American colonial art. Triptychs and other altarpieces along with many other examples of religious art of an exquisite blend of European and American Indian traditions made it one of the most memorable exhibitions I have ever seen, and certainly enriched the collections of the Museum of New Mexico. Many museums are thus enriched throughout the world – along with private collections – but for every object of religious art that enriches a museum, some church or monastery or shrine has been robbed of its riches. Some of these robberies have no doubt been perpetrated by North Americans simply taking what they wanted from Latin American shrines based on their unquestioned assumption that the ultimate and proper end of these religious objects was to amuse and divert the North American museumgoer or by more conventional thieves looking for a good price, but on the other side are the misguided or even faithless priests who have been only too glad to rid their churches of what they considered the superstitions of their peasant ancestors. But while such thefts and betrayals justifiably anger us, we do well to quell our anger in order to look at the underlying phenomenon, something more interesting than greed and cultural arrogance. The fact that objects originally intended for use, in this case to accompany worship, are now in museums instead of in churches is a significant fact that reveals something of the great cultural changes that the West has undergone in the past three centuries. For our civilization has taken art out of life and placed it in special institutions, such as museums or concert halls, to be viewed or listened to at special times, away from our normal lives. That what should be the best of our art and music is today seldom created for actual use as part of life is unprecedented in the history of mankind – like so much else in the modern world – and is also the main reason why artists in modern

times are so often alienated from their fellows and from the culture around them, for if that culture has lost much of its beauty, the artists have lost their functional relation with the rest of society. This has created a situation in which the self-expression of the individual artist is seen as the only end of the arts and complete freedom is necessarily demanded for this self-expression.² Without denying the existence of aesthetic principles, nevertheless, freedom for artists could become a rallying cry only in a society which has divorced art from life, and thus made any limitation on free expression seem contrary to the principles of the arts. In fact, this notion of complete freedom for the arts makes sense only if art is understood as something entirely autonomous, that is, having only itself as its law of being, and not related in any way to the common good of mankind or society or even to truth.

But if the divorce of art from life has created the alienated artist, it has also created the bourgeois philistine, who thrives on the plastic products of mass culture. Artist and philistine glare at each other from both sides of a great gulf, a gulf that is not inherent in Western civilization but is the result of the modern world's assault upon the unity of culture. If ever this gulf is done away with, we will find, I think, many problems solved and many things falling into place that we did not suspect were linked to this divorce of ordinary life from the arts and seemed unrelated to this particular matter.

Before the 18th century most art and music were created for some function in life and society. This purpose might be religious or civic or private, as in the case of portraits. Music was intended for worship, for dancing, for military purposes, or to accompany an ordinary activity, for example, eating. The excellence of the art was excellence for a purpose. Just as a good pot is one that fulfills well the purpose of a pot, so good art was art that fulfilled well the purpose of that particular example of art, whether it was a painting for an altarpiece or music for a dance. It was not intended to be something called "art" which must be judged by special canons unique to itself, anymore than pot makers would claim that their art must be judged by no one but themselves, without regard to how useful their pots were to the rest of us. Of course the makers of paintings for altars or of music for dances tried to make their creations beautiful, but so do the makers of pots. As I said, no one will deny the existence of genuine aesthetic principles, but these principles do not operate in isolation from the rest of life or from the function which the art object is to play in life.

As the 18th century progressed, however, more and more music was written for events outside of ordinary life, that is, for concerts, until by the 19th century that was the norm. Similarly, visual artists could now work with the intention of seeing their works hung in galleries, whether in museums or the homes of the rich, but still special places where one went to view “art.” Though noblemen had had galleries of miscellaneous objects since the Renaissance, public art museums, as opposed to heterogeneous collections of art, mechanical inventions and other artifacts, did not exist until around 1800, the Louvre, for example, having opened in 1793. No longer were the ordinary activities of life surrounded by the most beautiful things that could be seen or heard, but these things were increasingly available only in special places where those with enough time and money could go.³

Even the forms of the arts changed because of their changing place in society. For example, the symphony, which only began in the 18th century but became the most characteristic musical form of the 19th, was hardly fitted for any place but the concert hall, because of its length and the large orchestra which it required. Such pseudo-liturgical works as Verdi’s *Requiem* or Rossini’s *Stabat Mater* – however delightful they may be as pure music – were never intended for use in a church, again because of their length and the large number of musicians needed to perform them. Though superficially they were in the form of earlier liturgical music, their musical character clearly indicates the changed use to which music was now put. Such works were no longer elevating accompaniments to divine worship, but were ends in themselves, judged solely by aesthetic principles. It is true that even in the Baroque era there were such monumental liturgical works, such as Bach’s *Mass in B minor*, but they were much more of an exception to the quantity of functional liturgical music written by the best composers of the time. This modern situation of artists and society is frankly and well put in the following:

Until impressionism appears on the scene, basically painting is dictated by society. It’s only until impressionism appears on the scene, impressionist phenomena, that artists break with all sorts of traditions, even more so than in the renaissance; because with impressionism the artist becomes a sole entity, he has no direct role in society, in a sense he becomes a thing apart from regular society. And, in a sense, this is where he becomes truly important.⁴

This is a frank admission of what happened in the 19th century from someone who clearly sees it as a gain. But, as we will see, far from being a gain to either the arts or to society, this new situation of the independent artist became the cause of several related social problems.

The first, as I said above, was the phenomenon of the alienated artist. With art removed from its functions as part of life, and removed from being judged in part on how well it fulfilled those functions, there was no one left who could evaluate the worth of art except the artists themselves and the small band of art critics and connoisseurs, the “arts community,” as it is now termed. In earlier times artists and musicians worked with reference to men who were outside their fellowship, those who had commissioned the work and would pay the bill, whether they were princes, bishops, town councils, cathedral chapters, guilds, etc. Artists and musicians today work with reference to a small group, including other artists, museum or concert officials, and grants administrators, who themselves are part of the arts community, and accept the same standards as the artists. It is no wonder that the judgment of the general public on modern art is so different from that of its promoters.

In the beginning of this divorce of art from life, however, the art and its standards were unobjectionable in themselves. Apart from the fact that it necessarily is divorced from everyday life because of its form, who can fault the music of Beethoven or Brahms? But as time went on, in part because of restlessness and the desire to try something new, in part because of the general dissolution of Western culture, the contents of art, music and serious literature became ever more perverse. But now, when the general public, or even some intellectuals, tried to point this out, they were loudly told to mind their own business. No one had a right to judge art except the arts coterie, and by definition one was not part of the arts coterie if one found fault with contemporary art or music or literature. And of course, the fact that some of the criticism coming from the general public *was* philistine did not help the critics make their case against the contents of the arts.

Now at the same time that artists were growing apart from the rest of society, the rest of society was being robbed of its best art. Much of the great religious art was carted off to museums, and few contemporary composers wrote liturgical music really suitable for use in church. Of course this did not mean that there was no music or art in churches, simply that what there was was too often not of a caliber to lift anyone’s

soul to God. In most places the masses of Palestrina or William Byrd were no longer sung, but instead music that tended to the mediocre, while the often saccharine statues and pictures of the late 19th and early 20th centuries almost excuse the iconoclastic zeal of the post-Vatican II liturgists. No wonder that most men forgot what good art – functionally good art – was like, and simply appreciated the statues and music that they did have. At least it was part of their life and an accompaniment of important activities. But it was by no means inevitable that things would turn out so badly.

If the rich heritage of folk dancing, for example, had not been taken from people by urbanization and recorded music, would people be happy to dance to the same steps and music as their ancestors had for hundreds of years? Such music is so clearly superior to any dance music of the last hundred years that, were it again taught to us as young children, could even the bleakness of modern life or our television-dulled sensibilities take away our appreciation of it? Similarly and more importantly, is there any reason why men must value bad religious art and music when there is so much that is superlative? The average person does not visit art museums or listen to classical music, but his average ancestor of our Western culture worshiped in churches containing the best art in the world and heard the best music, whether it was simple plainchant or the complexities of the Baroque. In some degree, the average modern man has been taught to regard good art and music as alien to him. He is taught this by schools that attempt to drill him into liking it, rather than letting him soak it up unawares; he is taught this by the contemporary guardians of our artistic and musical heritage, who have kept the best for museums and concert halls, or who have betrayed their trust by equating Bach or Mozart with the electronic noises of a John Cage.

As a matter of fact this separation of art from life has been noticed by the arts community itself. Thus we have the government's "art in life" program, placing statues in public places or NEH putting poetry up in busses or subways. But aside from the fact that quite often the statues or the poetry that is offered does nothing but offend the public, are these really steps in the right direction, however well-intentioned they may be? The placing of statues in public places has a venerable tradition, but I fear that the above are simply efforts to make a little bit of life into a museum. In other words, is there an organic relationship between the piece of art and any public function, the type of organic relationship that exists in even the most poorly sculpted and tasteless war memorial in a

city park? The war memorial is trying to do what art has traditionally been supposed to do, beautify and elevate human life by beautifying and elevating the activities of human life, in this case the honoring of our dead. It is a part of life, not a part of a gallery dragged into the public square. In the past, great art was created with an end beyond itself. Though aesthetic principles are real and important, they are not sufficient for art that is functionless and organically unrelated to life.

At one time even the theater was not yet divorced from other activities of life. The ancient Greek dramas were produced for religious festivals and, of course, during our own Middle Ages, drama arose from the liturgy and continued to have an integral religious connection for several hundred years, as in the Corpus Christi cycles, large-scale religious dramas depicting the entire history of salvation, which were performed in medieval Europe around the time of the Feast of Corpus Christi. But to restore anything like that, even as regards visual art and music, it would be necessary once more for our culture to be unified. A unified culture unconsciously expresses what it considers to be truth through art, music and drama, and to a great extent, subordinates everything in the society to the overarching goals of the society. Thus in the Middle Ages guilds did not simply have an economic function. They had Mass, processions and special dinners on the feast of their patron saints; they had chaplains and shrines of their own. Indeed, even their economic function grew out of their religious one, in the sense that the recognition of the need to curb man's acquisitive appetite by regulation and the fostering of mutual charity sprang from a profoundly Christian desire to permeate every part of society with the spirit of the Gospel. But as long as men see society as made up of warring groups each trying to get the largest share of the pie, the arts community will continue with its program of self-expression and of contempt for the rest of us. The fact that so much of the rest of our plastic society does indeed deserve contempt does not make their criticisms more just or their artistic creations more worthy of esteem. The remedy instead lies in all of us submitting to the yoke of Christ, in cultural as in all other matters, and being willing to jettison both the sophisticated pornography of the elite as well as the false sentimentality of the masses. Only in this way can our culture be unified and the social reign of Jesus Christ the King commence once more.

NOTES

¹ Originally published in *Caelum et Terra*, vol. 3, no. 4, fall 1993.

² As Eric Gill wrote,

These special people are quite cut off from the ordinary needs of life and so they become very eccentric and more and more peculiar and their works become more and more expensive and so they are bought only by very rich people and so artists have become like hot-house flowers, or lap-dogs and so their works are more and more as peculiar as themselves and so we have all the new kinds of “art movements” and so what we call Art (with a large A) is now simply a sort of psychological self-exhibitionism.

“Art in England Now . . . As It Seems to Me” in *It All Goes Together: Selected Essays* (New York : Devin-Adair, 1944), p. 91.

³ Or as Eric Gill also wrote,

Music, if it be separated from occasion (the wedding, the funeral, the feast, the march and the Mass) is, like modern abstract painting and sculpture, nothing but a titivation of the senses, and all that can be said of worshippers at the Queen’s Hall is that they have possibly more refined tastes than those of children dancing to a barrel organ. But whereas the children, like new-born lambs, dance for exercise, the devotees of the concert are more like debauchees at a Roman feast – and if music entered the stomach instead of the ear, owners of concert halls would have to supply spumatoria. They have no use for music – they only want to enjoy it. Music as we know it today, in its latest developments, is nothing but a refined sensationism, a refined debauchery, psychological auto-erotism à deux, à trois, en masse. The history of music during the last 400 hundred years is the history of the progressive divorce of music from occasion, and the high talk musicians indulge in is no higher and no more precious than that which birth-controllers use to extol physical union . . . From Palestrina to Bartok and Stravinsky the history of music is a progress from meaning made attractive by music, through Handel and Gounod who straddled the fence, to music made attractive by meaning nothing at all.

A Holy Tradition of Working: Passages from the Writings of Eric Gill (West Stockbridge, Mass. : Lindisfarne, c. 1983), pp. 89-90. Originally from *Work and Property*, 1937.

⁴ Statement by Rafael Rivera García, professor of art at the University of Puerto Rico, in *Status of Puerto Rico: Hearings Before the United States-Puerto Rico Commission on the Status of Puerto Rico*, volume 2, *Social-Cultural Factors in Relation to the Status of Puerto Rico* (Washington : Government Printing Office, 1966), Senate Document 89-108, volume 2, serial set volume 12719-2, p. 47.

Compare also this statement by Thomas Molnar, “The dissociation of art and society was consummated by the end of the last century with theories justifying the ‘ivory tower,’ ‘art for art’s sake,’ ‘abstract painting,’ and so on.” *Authority and Its Enemies* (New Rochelle, N.Y. : Arlington House, 1976), p. 55.

SOME USES OF THE COMIC IN THE ENGLISH CORPUS CHRISTI CYCLES¹

One of the more interesting literary productions of medieval England is the Corpus Christi cycles, groups of plays depicting the events of salvation history, such as the creation of the world, the prophets of the Old Testament, the life of Christ, and ending with the Last Judgment. These were performed every year at the time of the feast of Corpus Christi, usually during the month of June.² They flourished in a number of English towns from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, though only four complete or substantially complete cycles are extant today, Wakefield (Towneley), York, Chester and N Towe (Ludus Coventriae). In most places the plays were produced by the local craft guilds, though in some towns special religious guilds had charge of them. The dramas were presented with great pomp, usually on a series of wagons pulled through the streets, while the audience watched from window or curbside.³

The basic outlines of these plays are familiar to any reader of the Bible, but they contain a different mode of presentation, a mode perhaps peculiarly medieval, and which to modern readers has often seemed strange or inappropriate. For in contrast to modern religious plays intended for a mass audience, which are apt to be saccharine in their spirituality and pietistic in tone, the cycle plays abound with vulgar humor and slapstick comedy. For example, in the second play of the Wakefield cycle, the Killing of Abel (Mactatio Abel), Cain responds to his brother Abel's friendly greeting with the line, "Come kiss my arse . . ."⁴ This sort of humor has made the plays controversial in many people's eyes. Earlier critics saw in the cycles a "distasteful raucousness and indecorum," and more recently some have considered the humor in these plays as inappropriate to their sacred or didactic purpose, or "part of the process of 'secularization.'"⁵

Although I think such judgments are wrong, nevertheless I believe that the connection between the humor in the cycles and the plays' basic aims is liable to be misunderstood. We are apt to think that religious plays must have a purely religious aim, that is, either devotional or didactic, and that to the extent they include other elements, such as humor, it must be a concession to the audience. But what to later cultures seemed incongruous, medieval culture saw as all of a piece, in the sense that

they all proceeded from the same source, God. For the humor in these plays is not simply a bit of comic relief inserted in basically “serious” dramas in order to keep the audience’s attention, but rather is a reflection of medieval culture’s unitary approach to its most basic beliefs, beliefs which encompassed everything, good and evil, serious and comic.⁶ How the comic is situated as part of this whole I will examine in this paper, in particular distinguishing two different kinds of comedy in these plays, and showing how each contributed to the overall aims of the cycles.

In the first place, it is well to set these questions within an understanding of the general medieval attitude toward the place and value of humor. Although some medieval writers taught that laughter and the comic were to be shunned, this was not the usual view.⁷ V. A. Kolve quotes an early fifteenth century English work, *Dives et Pauper*, for example, which gives a thorough justification for humor. After stating that laughter, mirth and honest recreation were fitting for Sundays and other holy days, the principal speaker in the dialogue, Pauper (the Poor Man), gives the underlying reason for his statements.

. . . the rest the mirth the ese and the welfare that god hath ordeyned in the halidayes is token of endlesse reste ioye and myrthe and welfare in heuenes blisse that we hope to haue withouten ende.⁸

Kolve also quotes a popular medieval story of the laughter of St. Brice. While St. Martin of Tours was saying Mass Brice began laughing. When he had finished the Mass, Martin asked Brice what he was laughing about, and Brice replied that he had had a vision in which he saw the Devil hit his head against the wall and that made him laugh. “And whan seint Martin herde hym, he knewe that seint Brice was an holy man.”⁹

Thus we can see that in their very *raison d’être* for laughter the medievals referred to their basic theological principles. Moreover, by the principle of *ridendo dicere verum* (by jesting to speak truth),¹⁰ the comic was able to be used with serious aims. If therefore we shall find that the comedy in the Corpus Christi cycles was involved in the total religious meaning of the plays, this should not surprise us.

In the most representative of these plays, the humor and slapstick are pervasive and usually associated with the evil characters, so that this aspect is sometimes referred to as the “comedy of evil.” If we examine two of the plays from the Wakefield cycle, the Killing of Abel (Mactatio

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Abel) and the Buffeting of Christ (Coliphizatio),¹¹ using a framework of a comic theory, we can see the comedy of evil at work and assess its purpose in the dramatic action.¹²

The Killing of Abel concerns the offering of sacrifice by Cain and his brother, Abel, and the subsequent murder of Abel by Cain, the first murder mentioned in the Bible (Genesis 4:2-16). The play opens with an harangue to the audience by Garcio, Cain's boy or farmhand, an extra-biblical addition to the story.

All hail, all hail, be blithe and glad,
For here come I, a merry lad;
Have done your din, my master bad,
Or else the devil you speed.

Know you not I come before?
And he who jangles any more
Must on my black horn blow a score,
Both behind and before,
Till his teeth bleed.¹³

Garcio continues in this vein, and when Cain enters at line 24 the two of them engage in loud arguing, slapstick and mutual abuse. This sort of thing continues throughout the play. Later Abel manages to persuade a reluctant Cain to join him in offering a sacrifice to God from the product of his hands, in Cain's case, from his harvested crop. Cain then rummages through his sheaves of grain searching for the smallest ones, complaining about all the hard work he has put into growing his crop, about hard times generally, and, of course, cursing Abel throughout.

Even the actual murder of Abel by Cain is dealt with in such a way. After Abel has died, Cain turns to the audience and makes one of his outlandish threats:

And if any of you think I did amiss,
I shall amend it, worse then it is,
That all men may it see:
Much worse than it is
Right so shall it be.¹⁴

This is absurd, of course, because even with the less rigid boundaries between actor and audience in the medieval stage, everyone knew that Cain the character was not about to walk out and begin beating up people

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In the first type of humor, the Cain-Garcio type, we have what is genuine comedy, even farce. Cain and Garcio are not laughing, of course. They abuse one another or Abel, curse, make outrageous threats. The audience laughs at their ridiculous statements and conduct. Their empty threats, their constant complaints, their selfish actions – these are what we laugh at because they are too ludicrous to be taken seriously.¹⁷ From the opening threats of Garcio to Cain's stinginess about the sacrifice, Cain and Garcio are shown to have no understanding of themselves or of the import of their actions. The audience laughs that any human being could be as selfish as Cain about a sheaf of grain, yet so indifferent to his theological destiny, to his salvation or damnation.¹⁸ Yet to the extent that the audience can recognize that they too share in these faults, they laugh not so much at Cain and Garcio as at human folly and lack of self-knowledge.¹⁹ The spirit behind the humor and behind our laughter is a humane look at our own folly, humane in the sense that we are able to laugh at Cain and Garcio – and at ourselves – not curse them or call for their damnation.²⁰

The Cain-Garcio type of comedy, then, would tend to make the audience identify the acts portrayed in the plays with the acts of their own and their neighbors' lives, not just as events in sacred history.²¹ As Bevington says,

A comic vision of man's inadequacy enabled the spectators of medieval drama to identify with a Noah or a Joseph not unlike themselves, troubled in wedlock, aging, humbled by awareness of inadequacy, and above all harassed by doubts of divine purpose.²²

By identifying their own faults with those of the characters, the audience was to conceive their own need for redemption, and by watching the degeneration of the world following the Fall of Adam they could likewise perceive in this the world of their own time;²³ but equally they are able to see the evidence of divine purpose and divine mercy, thus reaffirming the central beliefs shared by the community.

What of the second type of humor, that of Christ's suffering and death, where the characters themselves jest? Here is a reversal of the first type in that it is only the characters in the play who joke and laugh. It was inconceivable that the spectators would join in their laughter,²⁴ nor are the torturers presented in such a way that they would laugh at them. For they are neither butt nor wit, that is, they neither make themselves comic through their actions, as does Cain, nor do they succeed in making others

the butt of their own jokes.²⁵ It is true that they attempt this, and they suppose they are being very funny as they mock Christ, but in fact there is nothing comic in what they do or in what Christ suffers. Just because “brutal persons may laugh at a man who is being led to execution, or at the commission of some great crime” does not make it funny for others.²⁶

Like Cain, Christ’s torturers exhibit their extreme folly and lack of understanding of what they do. But the effect on the audience is entirely different. Cain did not laugh as he killed Abel; it is his ridiculous rage that is so funny. But in the play of the Buffeting humor is not used to evoke a comic regarding of human folly, but to inspire those who watched the plays with tenderness toward Christ.²⁷ Kolve argues that the torturers do not focus on Christ, rather on the game they are making;²⁸ similarly I think the play intends that we focus on what is happening to Christ, not on who is doing it. The jesting becomes simply part of the horrible action of the human race crucifying its God. It makes his suffering seem that much worse to us and it adds to the cumulative effect of all the evil done to Christ from his arrest to the spear thrust into his side after his death. Thus in the case of this second kind of humor, its purpose in being included was to nourish the pious spirit that was behind the entire cycle, indeed which is integral to the Christian religion itself.²⁹

Although this second kind of play contains humor in the sense that some of the characters laugh and jest, in what sense, if any, may we call these plays comedies? If we focus on the *characters’* little comedy for a moment, we may say that their treatment of Christ is an extreme example of treating the comic butt as someone “*unlike ourselves.*”³⁰ Moreover,

The persons whom we find ridiculous are those whom we feel we can slight, and slight deservedly and with impunity; to whom, therefore, we feel superiority . . . and those who believe differently from us . . .³¹

However, unlike Cain and Garcio, who truly exhibit the characteristics of ill-intentioned fools and are rightly subjects of laughter, Christ has not done anything worthy of ridicule. In making him an object of ridicule the torturers, as I said above, are revealing their own brutal sense of humor, and showing themselves as ill-intentioned fools, but not fools we laugh at.

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Are the plays of this second type, those chiefly of the sufferings and death of Christ, comedies at all? Olson notes that

. . . we can make our story extremely serious by telling the story so that it . . . [involves] persons whose good or evil fortunes are of the greatest possible value to us. On the other hand . . . we can turn it into the comic . . . by rendering absurd any part of the complex opinion on which seriousness rests . . . ”³²

It is clear that to a medieval audience, the sufferings of Christ were of a person “whose good or evil fortunes” were “of the greatest possible value.” And on the other hand, the antics of Cain and Garcio rendered absurd almost everything they did. This is why, as we saw, even the murder of Abel did not make that play serious. The whole thing is presented as too ridiculous to be taken seriously.³³

Is the Buffeting then a tragedy? The pity evoked from the audience is certainly the pity of tragedy, “pity . . . for the man suffering undeserved misfortune,” but does not seem to be matched by the corresponding “fear for the man like ourselves,”³⁴ for the audience did not fear that they themselves would have to undergo the sufferings of Christ. However, if we see that “the intention of the cycle as a whole is comic”³⁵ we can avoid classifying this play as a tragedy, for it is subsumed under the beneficent purpose of the entire action of the cycle.

Above I said that the connection between comedy and the evil characters – the “comedy of evil” – needed to be explained. Now I think we can see why there is this connection. If the comic mode is especially useful for rendering past actions present, and doing this so that we hardly notice what is happening, then it is a very useful device for bringing to mind our own misdeeds as we look at the misdeeds of the past. And the second type of comedy, the type used in the play of the Buffeting, can be very powerful for making something seem more terrible, since the mocking of a sacred thing or person is terrible to view. Here again its appropriateness is apparent.

There are thus two fundamentally different sorts of humor in these plays, one that invites us to laugh and look at the folly of all of us; the other, which is humor only in the eyes of the evil characters, that increases our horror and pity when Christ himself is tormented by sinful men. I think that an understanding of these comic modes and their uses helps materially toward removing some of the oddness we might feel about their use in the cycles. Yet there remains some element of

strangeness. We are not likely to have chosen such modes were we to have written these plays. As Kolve says, “we have lost the habits of mind, the ways of honoring, that fostered this kind of comic invention.”³⁶ Arnold Williams’ comment is more apt still.

The truth is that medieval artists could do such things precisely because their belief was unshakeable. If you believe, as Dante did, in the papacy, you can put the pope in hell. And hence these sudden forays into burlesque, mixing the sublime and the vulgar, which abound in Towneley, York, and Chester, and are occasionally implicit even in *Ludus*.³⁷

What Williams says here about strong belief is surely true, but I do not think it is the whole story. More important is the communal nature of that belief. Individuals in medieval society not only had private faith, but the society as a whole, publicly and officially and as a habit of thought, held those beliefs and expressed them in a public manner. The cycles themselves were obvious examples of this public expression of faith. John Gassner makes a similar point about the theatrical productions themselves.

A peoples’ theatre in the fullest sense – a festival lasting several days or longer inspired by epic or “universal” matter and unifying belief, the faith of the Universal or Catholic Church, and an open-air theatre of large casts and of a vast semi-participating public (many of the performers, the non-professional ones, were themselves members of the public in being members of the medieval trade or craft associations or “guilds” responsible for many of the productions) – this is the medieval theatre in its most impressive manifestations.³⁸

The cycles were able to be this “peoples’ theatre” because the shared faith which they both depended on and expressed was truly popular. Thus, I think, it is a mistake to assume that the purpose of the cycles was mainly didactic, i.e., to teach the populace the stories of the Bible. No doubt there was this aspect, but even more it was a communal expression, even witness or celebration, of this corporately held belief, a belief that encompassed and explained, and thus could include, everything there was. Some scholars have referred to such activities as “cultural performances.” As Kathleen Ashley comments, “Anthropologists have defined cultural performances as occasions on which a society dramatizes its collective myths, defines itself, and reflects on its practices and values . . .”³⁹

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As a result, then, there was room for play, for playfulness, for the whole of life, because all these were understood and could be explained according to the theological principles that permeated medieval culture. Thus the “mixing of the sublime and the vulgar,” as Williams calls it, comes about when a society is able to integrate all of human activity into its theology, not only the sacred, and because of this, sees nothing wrong in speaking of God in any available mode.⁴⁰ In a particular way for medieval society, this is rooted in the Catholic doctrine of the Incarnation, of God really becoming a human being and sharing in all the details of human life. To the extent that the modern world, and even modern Christianity, has repudiated or failed to see the implications of this doctrine, the modes of humor in the cycles will seem out of place. But that is the result of the different choices that medieval and modern civilization has each made. If we are comfortable with the results of our choice then we have nothing to be dissatisfied about. But if not, we know where we can find another path.

NOTES

¹ Originally published in *The McNeese Review*, vol. 36, 1998.

² “Corpus Christi falls between May 23 and June 24, depending on the date of Easter; because of inaccuracies in the old calendar during the late Middle Ages, however, the original dates were actually equivalent to June 4-July 6 on a modern calendar.” David Bevington, *Medieval Drama* (Boston : Houghton Mifflin, c. 1975), p. 230.

³ For a good general introduction to the Corpus Christi cycles, see V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, Cal. : Stanford University, 1966).

⁴ All quotations from the Wakefield cycle are taken from the edition in modern English, *The Wakefield Mystery Plays*, edited by Martial Rose (New York : Norton, 1969). This quote is on page 75

⁵ Bevington, p. 239. Bevington is noting the views of other critics but does not himself subscribe to this view. Clifford Davidson remarks that this “comedy remains controversial among those who . . . stress the importance of the didactic in medieval religious drama.” “Jest and Earnest: Comedy in the Work of the Wakefield Master” *Annuaire Mediaevale*, vol. 22, 1982, p. 65.

⁶ Bevington, p. 240.

⁷ Kolve, pp. 124-134, 139-140.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁰ See Davidson, p. 66.

¹¹ These two plays are both considered to be from the pen of the Wakefield Master. Thus what is said here applies most fully to his work, but also to the other plays in the Wakefield cycle, and, to a lesser extent, to the other cycles. For a list of the Wakefield Master's contributions to the cycle, see Davidson, p. 65.

¹² I will follow, for the most part, Elder Olson, *The Theory of Comedy* (Bloomington : Indiana University, c. 1968).

¹³ Rose, p. 73. The original of the seventh line is "He must blaw my blak hoill bore," which Bevington renders, "He must blow my black hollow hole." (p. 275). Though this line is obscure, it likely is a scatological reference, meaning roughly the same as Cain's "Come kiss my arse..." (Rose, p. 75). This sort of talk is characteristic of Cain and Garcio. In the same speech in which Cain tells Abel, "Come kiss my arse..." he also tells him to "kiss the devil's tail."

Garcio's speech to the audience sets the tone for the slapstick and insults that will follow, and his obviously impotent (because unrealizable) threats make him a ridiculous figure, a comic butt whom we laugh at. As we will see later, this is an important part of our analysis of the comic element in these plays.

¹⁴ Rose, p. 82.

¹⁵ All the Gospels recount this incident: Matthew 26:57-75; Mark 14:53-72; Luke 22:54-65; John 18:12-27.

¹⁶ Rose, pp. 370-371. This mocking humor is, of course, mentioned in the Gospel accounts themselves.

¹⁷ As we saw, even the murder of Abel is presented in such a way as to be comic. How can a murder be comic? "When we say . . . that tragedy imitates a

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serious action, we mean that it imitates an action *which it makes serious*; and comparably, comedy imitates an action *which it makes a matter for levity*.” (Olson, p. 36 — emphasis author’s) Thus Cain’s actions are presented as funny, including the murder. Of course, the Cain and Abel story could be presented seriously, as it is in the Bible.

¹⁸ In comedy “we must be made to feel that the object deserves whatever he gets.” (Olson, pp. 62-63) Olson distinguishes between the *ridiculous* and the *ludicrous*. The former “is always inferior, in a way which obviates the possibility of taking him seriously – that is, as the object of any serious emotion . . .” while the latter is “merely involved in something ludicrous, without actually doing anything ludicrous...” (p. 20) These both can be considered as comic butts. And on the other hand, there can be wits as the chief character in comedy. So that, “Properly speaking, then, the comic includes only the ridiculous, the ludicrous...the witty, and the humorous.” (p. 23) These result in a fourfold schema, in which there are plots of folly and plots of cleverness, with a butt or a wit respectively as the central character, who may be either well-intentioned or ill-intentioned. Thus this play is one with a plot of folly, and Cain and Garcio are examples of ill-intentioned fools for whom “there must be failure.” (pp. 52-53)

¹⁹ Davidson says that Cain’s action “reminds the audience of their own natural selfishness...” p. 67.

²⁰ Although the relationship between the one laughing and the one laughed at can, as Olson says (p. 16), emphasize “the *unlike*,” and even go so far that one says, “I take pleasure in his pain,” that is, in the pain of the one whom we laugh at, this is not always the case. Olson says elsewhere that “the comic quality is dependent upon the relation of the one who laughs to the one he laughs at. That relation is either friendly or hostile or indifferent.” (p. 62) He points out, for example, that Shakespeare’s “comic agents...are viewed with affection” (p. 91), and that in the case of Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, “what we *chiefly* react to is the manifest silliness of his supposition that he can repair his fortunes by seducing the wives and the absurd consequences that this supposition brings about.” (p. 92) Cain, despite the fact that he is a murderer, is presented as a figure of ridicule rather than of fear or hatred, and, as we have seen, even the actual murder is handled in this way. His ineffectual threats to the audience simply highlight his foolishness and impotence.

²¹ “The plays are not presented merely as representations of biblical

events from the Fall to Doomsday but are simultaneously pictures of everyday life.” Cecilia Pietropoli, “The Characterisation of Evil in the Towneley Plays” *Medieval English Theatre*, vol. 11, nos. 1-2, 1989, p. 85.

²² p. 240.

²³ “The Wakefield Master chose to shape the Christian story into a powerful *exemplum* to urge the contemporary audience to repent, to draw back from the evils around them and ‘endure captivity and hope for liberty.’” Alexandra F. Johnston, “Evil in the Towneley Cycle” *Medieval English Theatre*, vol. 11, nos. 1-2, 1989, pp. 101-102.

²⁴ “These dramatists presented the death of Christ as a thing of consummate horror and shame, clearly intending that the violence and laughter on stage should be answered by silence and awe in the audience, and if recent productions of these Passion episodes may offer a guide, they succeeded.” Kolve, p. 13

²⁵ Olson, pp. 64-65.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁷ Kolve, pp. 4-6, 138-139.

²⁸ pp. 175-205. See also, Jeffrey Helterman, *Symbolic Action in the Plays of the Wakefield Master* (Athens, Ga. : University of Georgia, c. 1981), p. 144.

²⁹ Hans-Jürgen Diller argues against those who hold that in this type of humor “there is to be found an undercurrent of irreverence and even blasphemy which runs against the plays’ official, religious purpose.” See “The Torturers in the English Mystery Plays” *Medieval English Theatre*, vol. 11, nos 1-2, 1989, pp. 57ff.

³⁰ Olson, p. 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

³² pp. 108-109.

³³ As Olson notes, abduction, rape, cheating of someone out of his home and goods – all these have been made matter for comedy by various playwrights. Everything depends on how the story is told. (cf. pp. 82-85, 103-105 and 108-110.)

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³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37. Olson is quoting here Aristotle's *Poetics*, 13 (1453a).

³⁵ Bevington, p. 240.

³⁶ p. 173.

³⁷ Arnold Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1961), p. 129.

³⁸ *Medieval and Tudor Drama* (New York : Bantam, 1971), p. xvi.

³⁹ Kathleen M. Ashley, "Cultural Approaches to Medieval Drama" in Richard K. Emmerson, ed., *Approaches to Teaching Medieval English Drama* (New York : Modern Language Association, 1990), p. 57.

⁴⁰ "Distinctions between secular and sacred and between folk and elite were not important on these occasions of communal festivity." *Ibid.*, p. 58.

IS POETRY POSSIBLE?¹

The decline of poetry and the decline of community in Western civilization are perhaps not as unrelated as they might seem. Nor does either decline need to be documented, for both are obvious. Poetry, certainly, does not have much of a function in our civilization today. It is rarely a subject of conversation nor do most people spend time reciting or reading it. Yet a little acquaintance with the history of literature will show that in the past poetry held a much higher place than it does now. At the same time as this falling off of poetry, civilization in the West has witnessed a decline in community, in any kind of public life that is shared by all elements in our culture. Is there any kind of connection between this loss of community and the loss of the common audience that seems necessary for poetry? Do the arts, and perhaps especially poetry, need a community in which to thrive, because they need a public character for their own good health? It is these questions that I wish to investigate in this essay, in order to understand the place of poetry in our culture today and the necessary conditions for its revival.

The beginnings of Western poetry were literally in a community. Homer's poetry was meant to be recited. Richmond Lattimore, the translator of Homer, has written,

First: the Iliad is essentially oral composition, since, *whether or not* Homer himself wrote it down, it was intended to be recited aloud, not read silently, and since it builds on a deep-piled tradition of oral recitations.²

And in what might be called the other font of European literature, the northern peoples, we find the same thing in *Beowulf*. In fact, in the poem itself there is an example of the bard's song as the community is gathered in the ale-hall eating and drinking.

Then song and revelry rose in the hall;
 Before Healfdene's leader the harp was struck
 And hall-joy wakened; the song was sung,
 Hrothgar's gleeman rehearsed the lay
 Of the sons of Finn when the terror befell them.³

Now obviously when poetry is recited before an audience, especially an audience of hard-drinking tribesmen or soldiers, it is something that must entertain the masses. Here there can be no question of poets slinking off to their garrets to write verses intelligible only to themselves

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or to other poets. Both the subject matter and the poetical form must please a very heterogeneous audience. And for centuries this remained the context in which poetry was produced. Even as late as the Renaissance, much lyric poetry was meant to be sung. And even when a particular poem was not intended to be spoken aloud, it was written with reference to the earlier tradition, with a sort of memory of the tradition's origins in oral recitation and employing the same broad canons for both subject and form. And though by the time of the Renaissance the intended audience for much lyric poetry had shrunk to the group of courtiers and other hangers-on about the royal courts, nevertheless it was a public, and as such was a standard external to the poet's mere predilections or moods. And certainly in terms of *subject matter*, poetry was written in the very public world created by the Faith, a world which everyone shared, whose teachings were common property. This public consensus of Christianity began to break down in the late 17th century, though it is true that even before then much verse was written which was more Neoplatonic than Christian. But by and large literature did reflect a community of belief and thus a community of discourse, which provide the background for poetry to exist and to thrive. Eventually, however, both the form and the content of poetry became more and more just a memory of the community in which it had once flourished, till with T.S. Eliot both were jettisoned because both seemed exhausted.

Another very important aspect of this question concerns drama. Until relatively recently, much verse that was written was in the form of drama. And of course in drama the public element can hardly be dispensed with. But earlier drama, both ancient and medieval, had an even more explicit link with the community, in that it was usually performed at or in connection with a religious festival. The classic Greek dramas were performed at a festival of Dionysus and the revival of drama in medieval Europe began with short plays actually performed during the liturgy. This connection with the Church lasted till the end of the Middle Ages and even later. Even after a direct connection with the Church calendar or the liturgy ceased with the Protestant Reformation, it was still the practice to present plays during festive times, which of course were still religious occasions. Thus in England well into the seventeenth century many plays were performed at court during the Christmas season or at some other holy day. Shakespeare's *King Lear*, for example, had its first performance during the Christmas festivities, on December 26, 1606, at the court of King James I.

Poetry began in the midst of a community, unified yet heterogeneous, and closely connected with that fact is that, at least in its roots, poetry was not the property of only one social class. Today we have an unfortunate separation of high culture from popular culture or mass culture. The terms “popular culture” and “mass culture” are generally used today as synonyms, but I think they should be distinguished. We do not have any popular culture nowadays, at least not in industrialized countries. What we have instead is *mass culture*. Mass culture is a culture manufactured at certain industrial or commercial centers and purveyed as a matter of business for cold cash. It depends on advertising for its success and is often designed or engineered by highly though narrowly educated individuals. A true popular culture, on the other hand, arises from the creative acts of the people, that is, from people in their own localities making their own poems and music and pictorial art, as well as the products of the useful arts. In any healthy society popular culture is highly traditional, that is, it is produced with reference to canons of taste and performance that have been handed down in that place. The best of popular culture is as good as most of the products of high culture. In what is called the Third World, popular culture still exists, but under capitalism and industrialism it cannot last, except in the highly artificial manner of something preserved for the tourist trade.

Popular culture is not the enemy of high culture. In fact, in a civilization that is culturally sound these two elements will exist in a healthy relationship, popular culture keeping high culture from becoming merely the expression of a perverse coterie’s tastes and views, and high culture giving popular culture certain forms by which it may express itself better and saving it from running to extremes. But high culture and mass culture either hate each other or ignore each other, for high culture despises mass culture and mass culture ignores high culture. High culture is correct in thinking that the products of mass culture are plastic and inferior, reflective of a very shallow sensibility. High culture, however, in such a situation, becomes narrow, incomprehensible, perverted, because it self-consciously retreats into itself, both as regards its forms and its contents. It loses contact with life as its practitioners form first a faction, then a sect, finally a cult.

Consider the following examples of both high cultural and popular or mass poetry from today and from the past. The first is from *Image* magazine, a quarterly “journal of the arts & religion”:

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Rising and going downstairs, forgetting
why, the purpose lost
in that soft gauntlet of descent,
I step into groundlessness
again, as in dreams where I fly though high-
ceilinged rooms,
the vast inchoate space of my repose.⁴

And this, from *The Saturday Evening Post*:

She stopped me at the grocery store,
and offered me a chip,
a cookie and a nectarine,
a bit of onion dip.

The next booth had a sample of
a sort of cardboard toast;
but the turkey dogs and ice cream
really got to me the most.⁵

Or another example, from a booklet of poems published by the Salesian Missions:

We live and learn in this old world
And as we older grow,
Still more and more we realize,
It's so little that we know.
There's one thing that we wish we knew,
It's where and when to speak
And how to say the things we feel
To help the poor and weak.

I think that one can see that the distinction in literature between popular or mass culture and high culture has now become a great gulf. The poem from *Image*, like most modernist verse, has rejected worn-out forms, such as meter and rhyme, which the “popular” poets continue to use with an entire lack of self-consciousness. The two kinds of poets would hardly acknowledge that what the other produces is poetry.

Consider in turn two examples from the past, an example of popular culture and of high culture of approximately the same time. The first is the opening two stanzas of a ballad, a true piece of popular poetry, originally oral literature. It probably assumed a relatively fixed form

around the 16th century. This particular ballad, “Barbara Allan,” was extremely popular and had dozens of versions, including many in this country. Originally, of course, it was meant to be sung.

It was in and about the Martinmas time,
 When the green leaves were a-fallin’
 That Sir John Graeme in the West Country
 Fell in love with Barbara Allan.

He sent his man down through the town
 To the place where she was dwellin’:
 “O haste and come to my master dear,
 Gin ye be Barbara Allan.”

Next is part of an early 16th century lyric poem, by Thomas Wyatt, one of the courtiers and hangers-on about the court of Henry VIII. His poem is an example of Renaissance high culture.

Farewell, love, and all thy laws for ever,
 Thy baited hooks shall tangle me no more;
 Senec and Plato call me from thy lore
 To perfect wealth, my wit for to endeavor;
 In blinde error when I did persever,
 Thy sharp repulse that pricketh aye so sore
 Hath taught me to set in trifles no store,
 And scape forth, since liberty is lever.

Now certainly there are differences between these last two selections, but I think they are both recognizably in the same broadly defined world. Unlike the contemporary poems I quoted, both would be understood as poems by the readers of the other. In fact, Sir Philip Sidney, a creator of much high lyric poetry, in his prose work, *Apology for Poetry*, published in 1595, mentions by name a popular ballad of the time, and though he places it lower than the products of high literature, nevertheless does esteem it. But I cannot imagine the editors of *Image* speaking highly of the rhyme from *The Saturday Evening Post* or from the Salesians’ booklet.

Certainly there has always been bad verse. Chaucer satirized some of it in his *Canterbury Tales*. But I do not think that the practitioner of high art and the practitioner of mass or popular art have ever been further apart than they are today. Each has his own distinct and contrary aesthetic.

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That of the creator of high cultural works is to a great extent framed as a reaction to what he conceives to be an exhausted group of artistic forms, such as realism in pictorial art, meter and rhyme in poetry, harmony and melody in music, and so on. I do not know whether any of these forms are in fact exhausted or not, but in any case, I do not believe that mere exhaustion of form is the root of the matter. For I think that the reason they seem exhausted to many people has more to do with the disappearance of the community that serves as a locus for the arts, and especially for poetry. Does the modern creator of high cultural verse understand the situation he is in and that it is not simply a matter of needing new forms, but of asking *why* and *how* these forms became void of meaning to him and whether any forms today could be satisfactory?

On the other hand, the aesthetic of the creator of mass or popular culture is also seriously defective. He is content to use the artistic forms hitherto in use in an almost mechanical way, and since the sentiments he wishes to convey are usually pretty shallow, and his audience is not too demanding as to quality in his use of these forms, he can get away with what he does. But it should be obvious that he does not have a solution to the problem of the disappearance of the community necessary for the existence or health of the arts. Indeed, he is unaware that there is any problem.

What is the result of such a situation, of the lack of community, for the state of the fine arts? As far as poetry is concerned, it is almost entirely missing from society. High cultural poetry does exist – but in a kind of living death. Certainly there are the journals and books of such poetry, and there are poetry readings, but I cannot help but suspect that it survives not as a living thing, but more because of the handed down belief that poetry is important, and because in certain circles all must make an obeisance toward contemporary poetry or be counted among the philistines. Outside of the self-conscious groups of poetry hangers-on, who reads contemporary high cultural poetry? It is preserved only because it is considered too venerable to discard.

And in the larger culture where is poetry? In greeting cards, in the lyrics of songs, in advertisements. Formerly many mass circulation periodicals carried some verse, but that number is getting smaller. We have no ceremonial recitations of epics; our poetry readings are a conscious act of the literary set, just as are the little poetry magazines. But it can scarcely be found elsewhere. I had to look around to find

any examples of mass cultural poetry. Fortunately I discovered that *The Saturday Evening Post* carries two pages filled mostly with verse in each issue. And as a matter of fact, the verse in the *Post* is, in a sense, an example of *popular* culture, though of popular culture divorced from tradition and emasculated by industrial civilization. It appears to be contributed by readers, not written for mass reproduction and sale. Why is this? It is because there is no money in mass culture poetry. This is not the case with the other mass arts. In pictorial art there are plenty of examples of mass cultural products which can be purchased and displayed in your living room. They are sold in malls and at roadside stands. And certainly all kinds of mass cultural music are available. Why is poetry missing? What is unique about it?

I think that poetry is more fragile than music or the pictorial arts. Poetry, in a sense, has less of a function. Music is unique and so are the pictorial arts in that they appeal to our senses in ways that nothing else can. But it seems that one can dispense with poetry. If we have anything to say with words, prose can tell the story or get the point across as well, perhaps just as well. Why then did our ancestors employ poetry to such an extent? In antiquity, even some philosophers and astronomers wrote in verse. But almost all contemporary high cultural poetry since Eliot is really just prose somewhat detached from sentence form and rearranged on the page. Look again at the poem from *Image*, now arranged as prose:

Rising and going downstairs, forgetting why, the purpose lost in that soft gauntlet of descent, I step into groundlessness again, as in dreams where I fly through high-ceilinged rooms, the vast inchoate space of my repose.

Aside perhaps from its dreamy vagueness, I do not think one could tell that this was not originally written as prose. I am not criticizing the poet; I have written such poetry myself. I simply ask why what little high cultural poetry we have left is nearly indistinguishable from prose. And if this means that poetry is dying or dead, can it be revived?

Others have noted the predicament we are in but have diagnosed it very differently. One interesting suggestion, that I nevertheless do not accept, was made by Gregory Wolfe, the founder and editor of *Image*. Writing in the same issue from which I took the poem earlier, Wolfe recognizes many of the things that I wrote above. He writes that "Western culture has become increasingly secularized and divided. We

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live in an age of fragmentation and discontinuity . . .”⁶ And he says a little later, “the communities that once inculcated cultural traditions, socialized behavior, and provided identity, have been broken apart.” He writes, however:

One of the ironies of American history, however, is that many Christians have contributed to the divisions in our culture. From the earliest days of colonization, the tradition of religious separatism has induced believers to withdraw from the public realm, or at least certain sectors of it. More often than not, separatism has created tightly-knit local communities, but has tended to weaken culture at broader levels. Both the Reformed denominations and the Roman Catholic Church have maintained ambiguous relationships with the public square. What these churches gained in terms of internal purity they tended to lose in their impact on the cultural mainstream.

In contrast to this, Wolfe proposes that “our mission now must be to dismantle the barriers. Christianity must once more be seen and heard in the public square.” But, aside from any other problems with this proposal, is there even any common square in which something recognizable as poetry to the entire population could be seen and heard? We are divided not just by the gulf between high culture and mass culture, but in many other ways as well. For Christians to create poetry, it must first be possible for poetry to exist.

Is poetry still possible? I do not know. I confess that I would like for there to be good contemporary poetry which is more than just prose rearranged. But I fear that if we simply write in the forms of the past, such as the sonnet, without the community that once sustained such verse, it will be only an artifact and relic of times gone away. Perhaps we could take a look at some of the older and mostly forgotten forms of verse, for example, Middle English alliterative verse, for models or suggestions. But I think that the cause is much deeper than merely that the verse forms which descended from the Renaissance seem exhausted to us. Certainly the divorce of music from poetry had some effect. But more importantly is the absence of a community, and also perhaps the occurrence of some kind of cultural shift, which I do not fully comprehend, but which has rendered poetry superfluous in our industrial civilization. I need hardly say which of the two, poetry or industrial civilization, I think worth preserving. But how to preserve – or rather revive – poetry is another matter.

Perhaps the best way would be to return to what seem to be the roots of poetry, especially to public drama. If verse drama could be successfully written and performed, perhaps this could serve as a beginning of the revitalization of poetry. But there is no public square in existence that could be the setting for this drama, because there is no public square at all. There is no common culture. Despite Gregory Wolfe's fear of the fragmentation of culture by Christians, I do not think we have any choice. Catholics who understand the connection between religion and culture, and who realize the imperative that the Faith transmits to us for the creation of community, could perhaps create drama for their own community. For only in such a context, if at all, is poetry possible. It began in a community, as something connected with a ritual act. Maybe it can begin again in that same way, as something somehow connected with the liturgy or the Church year. But if it cannot, then I think it cannot live.

NOTES

¹ Published here for the first time.

² *The Iliad of Homer*, translated with an introduction by Richmond Lattimore (Chicago : University of Chicago, c. 1951), p. 37 (emphasis author's)

³ *Beowulf*, translated by Charles W. Kennedy (New York : Oxford University, c. 1940), p. 35.

⁴ No. 7, fall 1994, p. 46.

⁵ March/April 1995, p. 34

⁶ "The Christian Writer in a Fragmented Culture," pp. 85-97. Quotes are on pages 86, 87 and 96-97.

THE UNITED STATES AS A CULTURAL VACUUM¹

In Robert Louis Stevenson's adventure novel, *Kidnapped*, the protagonists in their wanderings through the Highlands of Scotland come into a region called the Braes of Balquhider.

No great clan held rule there; it was filled and disputed by small septs, and broken remnants, and what they call "chiefless folk," driven into the wild country about the springs of Forth and Teith by the advance of the Campbells.

One of the aspects of Highland life most noted and celebrated in this novel is the connection of the individual to his chief and his clan. This connection involves great personal loyalty to the person of the chief, but, in addition, an individual's own personal identity depends upon his link with his clan. It was this which placed an individual, which made him something on the earth with roots, instead of one of the "chiefless folk." Without that he was someone cut off, as it were, not just from his own people, but from the whole human race, an atom in the void, hitting against other atoms, who themselves were moving at random in empty space.

The reason that some rooted connection was required for one to be able to relate to his fellows was that a man was not conceived as existing for himself under the terms that he himself creates. Just as a letter of the alphabet has meaning only when it is in its place alongside of the other letters, whether that place is first or last, so a man has purpose and meaning and relation with others only when he is in his place, alongside of his fellows. A single letter wrenched from its series is an absurdity. No words can be formed of it, in fact, it would be unrecognizable as a particle of a language. The same may be said of a human being. The Highland Scots of the 18th century looked on a man torn away from his context as a lone letter, meaningless, a sort of freak. Moreover, the development of the unity of the clan and of its common way of life or culture, took place over many centuries and in dialog, as it were, with the soil, the rocks, the waters, the animals, of the place where they lived. Eventually, when the Gospel was brought to Scotland, its light was diffused throughout this culture and brought new elements from afar. But through all this the culture developed in an organic fashion, in touch with both the people and their environment.

This way of life, whether of the Highlands of Scotland, or of any other traditional place, proposed a certain definition of a man. In this definition a man, a human person, means something only if he is somehow rooted in a place and among a people.² Consider the following more recent statement of the same truth.

A person becomes a non-person if he/she is denied his/her identity, language, culture, customs, traditions, history. Such a person loses all his/her creative powers.³

This statement was made in the very interesting context of the debate in Puerto Rico over the question of the political status of that unhappy island – should Puerto Rico become a state of the United States, continue in its present political arrangement or become an independent nation? And to many Puerto Ricans it seems that to become Americans in the full sense, it would be necessary for them to give up whatever being Puerto Rican entails. I will return to this quotation – and this question – later, but in the meantime the question of becoming fully American brings up the question of how America, meaning here the United States, treats this matter of the definition of man within his historical and cultural context. If to 18th century Scotland someone had and found meaning only in relation to his chief and clan, what does the United States offer in this regard? What sort of definition of ourselves does it hold out?

The definition of what it means to be a human person that is proposed by the United States is implicit in the image we commonly have of this country. Our history as a separate political entity extends back only to 1776, at which time, for many, perhaps most of us, not one of our ancestors lived within the bounds of the thirteen English colonies. But, we are told, this should not trouble us. We are all generously invited to appropriate for ourselves the status of descendants of those rebellious colonists and to make their tradition our own, and indeed to extend it back to the first English settlements in North America, to Jamestown and the Pilgrims, and back even further to England to capture such events as the signing of the Magna Carta, events that are held to have contributed to the formation of the American historical and political tradition.⁴ But in reality, as we all know, our actual histories are many and disparate, some indeed to England, most to other European countries, many to Africa, increasingly many to Asia. And to an important element of the population, the Hispanics, the historical tradition extending ultimately to

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Europe has been incarnated for over 500 years in other parts of the Americas and with very different historical landmarks and memories.

Now what does all this mean? If to a Scotsman cultural identity was derived in the first instance from immemorial identification with a clan, how can the United States urge its citizens to forget about their real historical and cultural past and assume a tradition and history going back only a mere 200 years? America does this because she in effect proposes a totally new definition of what it is to be a man. America is not interested, except in the most superficial way, in the historical and cultural roots of the many peoples who have come to live here, because America conceives that she has something much better to offer. The following series of quotes will make this a little clearer.

It cannot be denied, but by those who would dispute against the sun, that with America, and in America, a new era commences in human affairs. This era is distinguished by free representative governments, by entire religious liberty, by improved systems of national intercourse, by a newly awakened and an unconquerable spirit of free inquiry, and by a diffusion of knowledge through the community, such as has been before altogether unknown and unheard of. America, America, our country, fellow-citizens, our own dear and native land, is inseparably connected, fast bound up, in fortune and by fate, with these great interests. If they fall, we fall with them; if they stand, it will be because we have maintained them. Let us contemplate, then, this connection, which binds the prosperity of others to our own; and let us manfully discharge all the duties which it imposes. If we cherish the virtues and the principles of our fathers, Heaven will assist us to carry on the work of human liberty and human happiness.

– Daniel Webster, “A Discourse in Commemoration of the Lives and Services of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson,”
August 2, 1826.

We are provincials no longer . . . And yet we are not the less Americans on that account. We shall be the more American if we but remain true to the principles in which we have been bred. They are not the principles of a province or of a single continent. We have known and boasted all along that they were the principles of a liberated mankind.

– Woodrow Wilson, Second Inaugural Address
March 5, 1917.

We stand at the opening of the one hundred and fiftieth year since our national consciousness first asserted itself by unmistakable action with an array of force. The old sentiment of detached and dependent colonies disappeared in the new sentiment of a united and independent Nation. Men began to discard the narrow confines of a local charter for the broader opportunities of a national constitution. Under the eternal urge of freedom we became an independent Nation. A little less than 50 years later that freedom and independence were reasserted in the face of all the world, and guarded, supported, and secured by the Monroe doctrine. The narrow fringe of States along the Atlantic seaboard advanced its frontiers across the hills and plains of an intervening continent until it passed down the golden slope to the Pacific. We made freedom a birthright. We extended our domain over distant islands in order to safeguard our own interests and accepted the consequent obligation to bestow justice and liberty upon less favored peoples Throughout all these experiences we have enlarged our freedom, we have strengthened our independence. We have been, and propose to be, more and more American.

– Calvin Coolidge, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1925

And perhaps most telling,

America is not a piece of geography between two oceans and two borders. America is an idea . . .

– Attributed to Senator Hubert Humphrey.

The above quotes (and many more could be found to the same effect) show, I think, that America believes that she has found an entirely new way in human history, a way in which a man finds his meaning not by his link with the living past of his people and their organic institutions, but in a rational, calculated effort to bring about a new kind of life on this planet. Now it is “with America, and in America, a new era commences in human affairs,” an

era . . . distinguished by free representative governments, by entire religious liberty . . . by a newly awakened and an unconquerable spirit of free inquiry, and by a diffusion of knowledge through the community, such as has been before altogether unknown and unheard of.

No longer need men fear becoming “chiefless folk,” for our identity is no longer tied to our immemorial people and history.⁵ A new, liberated, informed citizenry has come into being, a citizenry that can invite all to

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join it in its endeavor of enlightenment. This altogether new nation invites everyone to appropriate for himself its history, embodied in its War of Independence and the formation of its government. It does not matter whether any of your actual ancestors were here or not at the time. For the principles you are invited to embrace are those of “liberated mankind” itself, and our work is universal, on behalf of no less than “human liberty and human happiness.” And if your real ancestors were of some of the “less favored peoples,” then rejoice all the more that you have rejected them and all they stood for as you become “more and more American.”

Above I placed a recent quote from a Puerto Rican writer which proposes a definition of man that essentially accords with that of traditional Scotland, and indeed, of the traditions of all of Europe and, I daresay, of the entire world. What answer does the United States make to that definition? When she invites all to appropriate for themselves a history that is not theirs, does she render us non-persons, as we deny our “identity, language, culture, customs, traditions, history?” I think that the answer the United States would make to this charge is to maintain that these things, though doubtless nice in their place, are not of supreme importance. What matters that the cultural, intellectual, historical traditions that are in fact native to you are lost? Something greater is present here, something that goes to the bedrock of human nature, something that wipes away the cobwebs of the crusty traditions and customs of the Old World. The New Man is being created here, this is the *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, as our Great Seal proclaims, the *New Order of the Ages*.

It should be obvious that there are profound differences between the philosophy of man that America upholds and that of traditional mankind. America is full of “chiefless folk,” and instead of deploring it, she celebrates it and invites us all to celebrate with her. If America is an “idea,” then this idea can be extended over the entire world, and instead of men being defined by their roots and ties, they will be liberated atoms in a rational void.

Unfortunately, most Americans have evinced all too little discomfort with this state of affairs. Most of us have been eager to embrace the material goods delivered, or at least promised, by the new country, and to let others worry about the question of lost cultures and such matters. The Puerto Ricans who desire statehood for their island are the latest case in point. They quote statistic after statistic about the economy and taxation and ignore questions of personal and cultural identity.⁶ The case of Puerto

Rico, moreover, is a very interesting one, for as Hispanics, Puerto Ricans are the heirs to an extremely rich historical, intellectual and cultural tradition, a tradition which differs markedly from that of the English settlers of North America. Is it possible for an Hispanic to give up his own tradition in order to “become an American?” In order to do so Hispanics would have to give up the historical landmarks that define their own culture. For example, the Laws of the Indies, the generally humane and exemplary legal code set forth by the Spanish crown for governing the New World and its native inhabitants, where do they stand in the national American mythology? Can they rate beside the Mayflower Compact? Or the Virgin of Guadalupe – could she ever compare with George Washington praying at Valley Forge? I remember once seeing an exhibit at a state university of facsimiles of historical documents that were held to have contributed to the formation of the United States. They began with Magna Carta and included documents such as the Petition of Right, the English Bill of Rights and of course our own Declaration and Constitution. But how could someone with the venerable heritage of Spain and Spanish America appropriate all of this for himself without denying everything that he is? Perhaps without unmaking himself as a human being? Unless culture and history have no meaning, and we are best understood simply as eating/drinking/procreating beasts, then I do not see how one can simply divest himself of that which links him with history and mankind. But what else does the United States offer to anyone?

Hispanics are simply the most extreme example, since they are relatively unassimilated and live right next door to a part of their own homeland. But most of us are in fundamentally the same situation, though the passage of two or three or more generations of ardent and active assimilation makes it easier to forget. But before saying how I personally look at this, we should briefly turn to America’s latest attempt to deal with the question of cultural identity, the practice of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism seems to offer a remedy for the situation I have sketched, that of requiring everyone to pretend he had an ancestor on the Mayflower. It affirms the worth of varying traditions that have formed the peoples of the United States, and indeed, often seems to value their traditions and experiences above those of the traditional majority. But what really is going on here? I would argue that multiculturalism, as it is commonly understood, only trivializes the cultures it purports to embrace, rendering them little more than quaint collections of customs,

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and that its real goal is relativism and the promotion of Anglo-Saxon secular liberalism. Again, let us look at Hispanics.

Hispanic civilization came to this hemisphere as a militantly Catholic and Latin embodiment of late medieval culture. In addition to the Faith, it brought Roman law, universities, the study of Aristotle, the printing press, Renaissance and baroque music and art, European cities, in short, the spiritual, intellectual and social life of Western tradition. But is this what the multiculturalists value? Instead they absurdly classify Hispanics, the very people who brought the West to America, as a non-Western minority! They are not interested in real Hispanic culture, for in it are the very things they so much hate and fear about their own ancestors, above all, the Catholic faith. But by contrasting selected aspects of Latino life with their own narrow and selective version of Western civilization (which they equate with the scientific rationalism and liberal atomism of the last few centuries), our current official guardians of the cultural establishment manage at the same time to denigrate the real West and pretend to foster Hispanic culture. But by emptying Hispanic culture of its spiritual and intellectual content, they simply advance the notion of cultural relativism and thus end up advancing their own orphaned and bastard segment of Western culture – a segment that arose only with Descartes and Locke. Paradoxically they thus promote the desiccated scientific rationalism that multiculturalism was supposed to replace in the first place.

In short, multiculturalism is an effort to use other cultures to create the impression that all is flux, and to assert that any definitive judgments about right and wrong or about truth are a kind of cultural imperialism. Were its upholders truly interested in, for example, other religions and their adherents, they would have to recognize that their own secularism is an affront not merely to orthodox Catholics or conservative Protestants, but to every religion. Thus the very groups whose cultures they supposedly foster are in fact destroyed by their efforts and teachings, for cultural relativism ultimately teaches the triviality of every culture except modern Western secularism.

Though I do not know whether many others feel the need to identify with a historical tradition in order to be whole, I admit that I certainly do. I am not at all comfortable with being of the “chiefless folk.” And the solution to the dilemma for me – heir to decades of assimilating forebears – is to look upon all of traditional Europe as my cultural home, since in my case any but the slimmest of living links with any

particular European nation have been broken. Moreover, as a matter of fact, my ancestors did come from more than one part of that continent. So though I do not have the immediate and everyday richness of culture that Hispanics can, and should, dwell in, the intellectual and cultural life of European civilization makes me feel not quite so lost. America cannot take that from me and try to satisfy me with vain dreams of a new land of liberty and a new beginning of the human race. And though I lack the daily cultural customs that characterize one for whom culture is something living, not just something taken from books, pictures and recordings, still I am glad and grateful for what I can do and can try to be. It is likely to be all that there will be for a long time.

I fear, however, that what I just said will give the wrong impression. I do not, for example, regret that my accent betrays me as an American or that I hold silverware in the American fashion, or indeed, that my whole appearance and behavior show that I am an American. That is not what I mean. America, the United States, as a place where people dwell and live in a particular way, insofar as that way of living can be separated from its political ideology, I recognize as my home. I am not a European. I only do not want us to cut our cultural roots, to cast aside everything that makes us part of the human race, in a Enlightenment dream of making a new beginning and forging a new man. It is less America that I reject than the idea of America, the idea that so many of our politicians and orators have seen as the essence of being American. But, paradoxically, if, as Wilson said, the principles of America are those of "a liberated mankind," they have little or nothing to do with how we actually live in this spot of earth. Hitherto, the real America has been a society of mostly descendants of Europeans living across the ocean from Europe. To the extent that we tried not simply to adapt but to *deny* our European heritage, we tried to create the myth of America as the New Order of the Ages, an incarnate idea that offered liberation to all the "less favored peoples" of the world. But I think it is possible to accept America as simply a place where men dwell across the sea from their original home. Of course, what America will become if those whose origins are in Europe become a minority is another story. But for the time being, at least, I think we can overcome our status as "chiefless folk" if we take hold of what are the only roots we have or can ever have, those that nourished our ancestors for centuries and necessarily are our way of connecting to the rest of the human race. These prevent us from being atoms in the void, even the void of a "liberated mankind."

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¹ Originally published in *Caelum et Terra*, vol. 4, no. 3, summer 1994.

² In a similar analysis of this problem, Will Herberg says that the question “What am I” is “perhaps the most immediate that a man can ask himself in the course of his social life . . . Unless he can so locate himself, he cannot tell himself, and others will not be able to know, who and what he is; he will remain ‘anonymous,’ a nobody – which is intolerable. To live, he must ‘belong’; to ‘belong,’ he must be able to locate himself in the larger social whole, to identify himself to himself and to others.” *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (Garden City, N.Y. : Doubleday, rev. ed., 1960), p. 12.

³ Ismael Rodriguez Bou, “Culture and Education in Puerto Rico.” Lecture delivered in Cleveland, Ohio, March 16, 1956. Quoted in *Proposed Legislation to Authorize a Political Status Referendum in Puerto Rico*, vol. 2. Hearing before the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs. (Washington : Government Printing Office, 1991), p. 784. The feminist language is given in the source quoted, but I doubt it was in the original lecture.

⁴ “The ‘national type’ as ideal has always been, and remains, pretty well fixed. It is the *Mayflower*, John Smith, Davy Crockett, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln that define the American’s self-image, and this is true whether the American in question is a descendant of the Pilgrims or the grandson of an immigrant from southeastern Europe.” Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, p. 21.

⁵ Referring mainly to America, Thomas Molnar wrote the following, “By definition, all immigrants uprooted themselves; and not as nationals but as displaced persons – in fact, isolated individuals – did they found a new entity.” *Authority and Its Enemies* (New Rochelle, N.Y. : Arlington House, c. 1976), p. 77 (note 37).

⁶ For example, in hearings before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee on January 30, 1991, in an exchange between several U.S. senators and the representatives of the various political parties in Puerto Rico, the representative of the Puerto Rico Independence Party spoke of nation and Spanish heritage, and even asked how many Spanish-speaking poets or philosophers the State of New Mexico has produced, while the statehood advocate quoted statistics about the growth in the number of hotel rooms in Puerto Rico versus Hawaii. *Political Status of Puerto Rico* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1991), pp. 180-181.

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A number of years ago I was involved for a time with the Esperanto movement. Esperanto, as most people know, is a planned language that is designed to supplement the existing national languages for international communication purposes. And during my involvement with Esperanto I was often puzzled as to why that language had never obtained greater acceptance. I myself was convinced of the utility of an international language from the example of Latin in the Middle Ages, and I thought that the benefits of a tongue that united mankind would be obvious to all, especially to our secular intellectuals and educators, who seemed largely hostile to unreflective nationalism. I even hoped, naively I now see, that some of these educators might want to experiment with a university curriculum entirely in Esperanto, just as higher education in the Middle Ages had been entirely in Latin.

After a few years I saw that Esperanto was going nowhere, and besides I have since come to see that whatever efforts Catholics make toward an international tongue ought to be directed instead toward Latin. But still my question remained, Why was there so little interest in a language to unite mankind? The advantages seemed so obvious to me. In the case of education, as Chesterton said, medieval students “had all come to the same school to learn the same philosophy. And though that might not prevent the starting of a quarrel, it might have a great deal to do with the ending of it.”² But of course, if they were to come to the same school, they would have to be prepared to study in the same language. The benefits of this – the lessening of noxious nationalism, the elimination of linguistic barriers to the advancement of knowledge – were such, I thought, as to appeal to educated opinion. Except that educated opinion had little or no interest in the subject.

Gradually, however, I began to see why, at least among Americans, there was a lack of enthusiasm about an international language. And it was that we believed we already had one. And this language was none other than our own English.

It is certainly the case that English is widely spoken, and in some sense can be called an international language today – at least the international language of commerce and technology. But however that may be, it became clear to me it was not just that English was perceived as the international tongue. It was everything that English, especially American English, stood for. English as a universal language was both a symbol

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of and an agent for a universal civilization or culture. English was a visible sign of the new world order that the globalization of commerce was fast creating.

Consider some interesting quotes from a recent article in *Foreign Policy* magazine.³ The author of the article, one David Rothkopf, embodies in himself most of the separate components of the American power structure. He is a former high official in the Clinton Commerce Department, an adjunct professor at Columbia University, and managing director of Kissinger Associates, a consultant firm founded by former Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. I am grateful to him for the candidness of his article, for he makes it very clear why the American elites would never be interested in Esperanto – let alone Latin!

Mr. Rothkopf begins by warning of a new nationalism, a nationalism that is attempting to hold back or check globalization. This, he argues, is futile. Globalization is coming and will affect everyone in the world and will impact every culture. Governments that try to keep out what they regard as negative, such as Singapore's efforts to keep out Internet pornography, are doomed to failure.

Rothkopf looks on this globalization as something good, because globalization promotes integration and the removal not only of cultural barriers but of many of the negative dimensions of culture. Globalization is a vital step toward both a more stable world and better lives for the people in it.

Better lives? For some people anyway, and it seems especially for Americans. For

it is in the economic and political interests of the United States to ensure that if the world is moving toward a common language, it be English; that if the world is moving toward common telecommunications, safety, and quality standards, they be American; that if the world is becoming linked by television, radio, and music, the programming be American; and that if common values are being developed, they be values with which Americans are comfortable.

And further, "Americans should not shy away from doing that which is so clearly in their economic, political, and security interests" and, it seems, by a happy pre-established harmony,

so clearly in the interests of the world at large. The United States should not hesitate to promote its values. In an effort to be polite or politic, Americans should not deny the fact that of all the nations in the history of the world, theirs is the most just, the most tolerant, the most willing to constantly reassess and improve itself, and the best model for the future.

Most of my readers, I think, will agree with me that this last is a preposterous statement. After all, do we really want the culture of pornography, rock music, divorce, and many other assorted evils exporting itself around the world? Can any society that allows abortion call itself just? But bad as these things unquestionably are, I would suggest that this is only part of the issue. America has had some very questionable goods to export for many years, and at the same time has been afflicted with a messianic complex that accords exactly with Mr. Rothkopf's desires to remake the world in our own image. To explain this, let me begin with a quote from the Catholic historian, Christopher Dawson.

The United States achieved their independence in the heyday of the European Enlightenment, and this ideology of the Enlightenment was the foundation of their national existence. The peoples of Europe, in spite of their revolutions, were committed to the past and to their separate national traditions. But Americans were committed to the future. They saw the Revolution as the dawn of a new age and a new civilization which was destined to be the civilization of a new world, and consequently the principles of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were not transitory and fallible opinions but absolute truths which no citizen could question and which were to remain the firm foundations of the American way of life.⁴

In other words, Americans saw themselves as the creators not only of a new nation, but of a new way of life, "a new civilization which was destined to be the civilization of a new world." The United States of America was not to be simply one more nation among many, not simply a group of former colonies which had outgrown the tutelage of the motherland. America was to be a new kind of nation embodying a new way of life. It is not hard to find evidence of this sentiment in the remarks of American statesmen and politicians throughout our history.

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Consider just a few. The first is from a speech of Daniel Webster, delivered on August 2, 1826.

It cannot be denied, but by those who would dispute against the sun, that with America, and in America, a new era commences in human affairs.

Or from Woodrow Wilson's second inaugural address, March 5, 1917.

We shall be the more American if we but remain true to the principles in which we have been bred. They are not the principles of a province or of a single continent. We have known and boasted all along *that they were the principles of a liberated mankind.* (emphasis mine)

Or lastly, from George Bush's State of the Union Message, January 31, 1990.

America – not just the nation – but an idea, alive in the minds of people everywhere. As this new world takes shape, America stands at the center of a widening circle of freedom – today, tomorrow and into the next century.

These quotes, in different ways, witness to two ideas. First, that America sees herself as something essentially new in human history, and secondly, that America considers herself as not just one particular nation in a particular place, but as somehow universal, with universal principles meant for all mankind. Most of us are brought up on this sort of rhetoric and do not see anything especially wrong with it. But try this little exercise. In the above quotes, substitute any other country of your choice for America. As: 'With Nepal, and in Nepal, a new era commences in human affairs.' Try it for the other quotes too. The results, I think, clearly show the messianic quality of our rhetoric. America is a nation with a universal ambition, and Mr. Rothkopf is simply among the most recent to enunciate it.

Perhaps, though, some might think that it was not all that bad for Daniel Webster, or even Woodrow Wilson, to desire the spread of American ideals throughout the world. America was surely better then. And it is true that many of the evils which currently plague this country hardly existed in 1826 or 1917, but despite this, there are still good reasons to question America's universal ambitions. Let us take a closer look at what these ambitions mean.

America's messianic ambitions, as we saw, are twofold: the establishment of a new way of life, and the belief that this new way of

life is a universal way of life, one meant for all mankind. These beliefs, however, confound what alone God can do with what man can do. Mere political structures and arrangements cannot essentially alter the human condition. Only Jesus Christ can say: "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5). Nor can it possibly be true that one group of men in one place could have hit upon political or social notions so wise as to be forever after appropriate for all of mankind. It is only Christ's Church that is catholic or universal, not the American nation. In short, America, in the constant rhetoric of her orators, is holding herself out to be something she could not possibly be.

Although America cannot replace God, it is the case that she is a nation of a new type. That is, in her attempt to be new and universal, she does make herself different from all the traditional nations of the world. For America is as much an idea as a nation. As George Bush said, "not just the nation – but an idea, alive in the minds of people everywhere." This is not the normal way a nation thinks of herself. The only other nation with similar messianic ambitions was the Soviet Union, and the New Soviet Man was the embodiment of her supposed new and universal way of life. But the reality of the Soviet Union was very different. Communism was new, but not in the sense that Communists believed it was. Enlightenment Americanism is also new, but not in the sense that Americans believe it is. Both are new in the sense that they are new intellectual and political movements in history, but they are not new in that they create an essentially new era in the annals of humanity. Man is left as before; neither of these ideologies could possibly change that.

But just as Communism by its philosophy struck at the foundations of society, so the United States challenged by her philosophy the existing foundations of European culture. And she did this by striking at the religious foundation of existing society.

At the time of the establishment of this country, the entire Western world was officially committed to the belief that religion was the foundation not only of the lives of individuals, but of the life of the state and of the nation as well. It is true that men did not always behave as if their relationship with God was the most important thing about their lives. And it is also true that this very dedication to religious belief could itself produce warfare and civil strife. The devastating Thirty Years War, the last great religious war, had ended only in 1648, less than 150 years before our constitutional convention met. And the several wars that occurred between France and Great Britain in the 18th century,

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though primarily having political and economic causes, often had an undercurrent of religious hostility too. So it is easy to see why not just the doctrinaire philosophes of the Enlightenment might think that a little less religion in public life would be a good thing for everyone.

But it is one thing to arrange for men of varying religions to live together in peace, and another to usurp the place of religion with a messianic secular philosophy. But it is precisely the latter that America did, and she accomplished this by rendering religion a purely private affair in the new nation.

The truly unique thing about America has been our successful attempt to privatize religion, an attempt founded in the religion clauses of the First Amendment to the Constitution itself, that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” As understood in both official legal interpretations and in the popular mind, these words not only prohibit religious coercion (an entirely proper goal of the Founding Fathers), but remove any religion founded on dogma, or even any concern at all for religious *truth*, from the public life of the nation. And we have replaced it with the secular principles of Americanism. As the social critic, Will Herberg, has argued, “the American Way of Life is the operative faith of the American people.”⁵ If religious faith is considered important, it is faith itself that is desired. The important thing is to have a religion; what you actually believe is a private matter. As President Eisenhower said, “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith – and I don’t care what it is.”⁶

Now it is true that this civil religion no longer flourishes as it once did. But it is still there. Politicians still sometimes invoke God or end their speeches with a “God bless you.” And let no one forget that President Clinton himself prayed to this god of the American civil religion before he vetoed the Partial Birth Abortion Act. We are to be reassured *that* he prayed, since this denotes some kind of religious faith. But since the content of religion is totally privatized, no one can gainsay this god’s advice to him or to anyone else. In the American conception of religion, faith is an entirely private matter. But it will be clear that this religion has nothing to do with the religion of Jesus Christ.

President Eisenhower wanted Americans to have a faith, any faith. And earlier than that, President Washington said much the same thing. In a famous passage in his *Farewell Address*, Washington characterized “religion and morality” as “indispensable supports” for “political

prosperity,” and stated that “reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.” Here again any faith will do, for religion’s role is purely instrumental, to support “political prosperity.”

Neither Washington nor Eisenhower, of course, would have been hostile to deeply held beliefs. But each assumed that such beliefs were a private matter. They were doubtless important to individuals and families, but had nothing to do with the common life of America. The intense Protestant Christianity that has marked different periods of American history likewise has too often been content to be merely a private and individual expression of Christianity or it has blended without much difficulty into American civil religion. As Christopher Dawson said in 1960,

Thus American religion was detached from the objective world which was the domain of business and politics and focused on the subjective world of religious feeling – above all the intense experience of religious conversion. This, I believe, has left a permanent mark on the American mind, so that, as several Americans have remarked to me, they find some difficulty in relating the two concepts of religion and civilization since these seem to belong to two quite distinct orders of existence.⁷

When I was in the first through fifth grades, from 1957 to 1962, in public school in Ohio, we had prayers and Bible readings every day. My fifth grade teacher in particular was a devout Protestant. But none of this influenced at all the content of our schoolwork, which was based on the religion of progress and the American Way of Life. For if religion is a subject as real and as important as math or history or spelling, it cannot be limited to a bit of window dressing at the start of the day.

America, then, has successfully based her public life on the shared belief in the American Way of Life, “the principles of a liberated mankind,” as Woodrow Wilson proudly proclaimed. And real dogmatic religion has been relegated to the private realm, at best a prop for personal morality or solace. And more and more it seems that the fate of “liberated mankind” is to be reduced to the status of producers and consumers. Let us look once more at David Rothkopf’s article.

The global marketplace is being institutionalized through the creation of a series of multilateral entities that establish common rules for international commerce. If capital is to flow freely, disclosure rules must be the same, settlement procedures consistent, and redress transparent. If goods are also to move

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unimpeded, tariff laws must be consistent, customs standards harmonized, and product safety and labeling standards brought into line. And if people are to move easily from deal to deal, air transport agreements need to be established, immigration controls standardized, and commercial laws harmonized.

On the Great Seal of the United States, which appears on the back of the one dollar bill, is the motto, *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, the New Order of the Ages, a perfect motto for American messianism. And in our time this New Order of the Ages has become simply the freedom for “capital . . . to flow freely” and for people “to move easily from deal to deal.” The “principles of a liberated mankind” consist in our trying to outsell everyone else and ensure that in a world which has become nothing but a market, we will all be busy running “from deal to deal” in the service of the god mammon.

But there is another possibility. George Bush said that America was both idea and nation. But actually America is not two things, rather there are two Americas, the America of the idea and the America of people and land. One is a secular messianic dream which I do not think any Catholic can accept. But the other is the land in which, by God’s providence, we have been born or we have come to live. And toward this latter we may and even should have feelings of affection. Pope Leo XIII stated the true principle of patriotism when he wrote, “the natural law enjoins us to love devotedly and to defend the country in which we had birth, and in which we were brought up . . .” (Encyclical *Sapientiae Christianae*). This is patriotism that any Catholic can accept and foster. We are enjoined to love our country not because she is the harbinger of a new age or because she has a message for the whole world or because she is the best that there is. No, only because we happened to be born and brought up there. In America this modest kind of patriotism is overlaid and shouted down by the patriotism of the idea. But if we are to make sense both of our faith and of our country, we must nevertheless try to foster it. Nor should we fear that this traditional sort of patriotism will produce an irrational attachment to one’s country that disregards the rights of other nations. Rather it is the messianic type of patriotism that seeks to extend America until the entire world is nothing but a vast parking lot for a worldwide McDonalds, full of American music, American television and American gadgets.

The left and the right each has its own version of American messianism. It is practically in the air we breathe. It will not be easy to resist it or to promote healthy love of country in its stead. But we have, I

think, no choice but to try, however discouraging the task. After all, we have been told: “In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

NOTES

¹ Originally published in *New Oxford Review*, vol. 65, no. 2, February 1998 as “The Americanization of the Globe.”

² *St. Thomas Aquinas* (Garden City, N.Y. : Image, c. 1956), p. 68.

³ “In Praise of Cultural Imperialism?” no. 107, summer 1997. The passages quoted are on pages 39, 44, 45 and 48-49.

⁴ *The Crisis of Western Education*, (New York : Sheed and Ward, c. 1961), p. 182.

⁵ *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, N.Y. : Doubleday, rev. ed. 1960), p. 75.

⁶ Quoted in Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, p. 84.

⁷ “America and the Secularization of Modern Culture,” a lecture delivered at the University of Saint Thomas, Houston, Texas, 1960.

CATHOLIC CULTURE AND AMERICAN MULTICULTURE¹

There seems to be increasing interest among North American Catholics in the concept of Catholic culture. By culture here I do not mean the great art, music or literature of Catholic nations and ages, but rather the idea that Catholicism is not simply a religion, not simply something spiritual, but is something that should influence and shape not just our private lives, but even our public and common social life, the entire life of the community. Whenever Catholics have been able to do so, they have always expressed their faith in a thousand details of public and private life. The Vatican's International Theological Commission, for example, in a 1988 document on *Faith and Inculturation*, spoke of the "numerous devotions in which Christians express their religious sentiment . . . among other things, of festival, pilgrimage, dance, and song."² Anyone who has ever visited a country whose culture was formed by the Faith knows how not just the way of life, but even physical structures, such as roadside shrines or chapels, reveal the Catholic faith of the inhabitants. And if the Faith truly shapes a society, its influence extends even to such matters as the economic system, the use of technology or the type of education. All of these customs and institutions are a sort of continuation of the Incarnation. Just as God himself became incarnate into the human race, so the Catholic faith becomes incarnate in the actual practices of human life. This is the natural way that Catholics ought to live, and to be forced, as we are, to live in a public culture that denies the truths of the Faith, is to live a cramped Catholic life.

Now, as I said, many Catholics are becoming aware of these truths, and are looking for ways to create some kind of Catholic culture in North America. I am entirely in agreement with these efforts. But I want to take a look at a few of the difficulties that necessarily arise in attempting to do this. There are some difficulties that would be common to anyone seeking to create or restore a Catholic culture anywhere, while others are unique to North America. It is particularly these latter that I will address in this essay, and at the same time as I discuss them I will indicate what seems to me the best way out of them.

The first difficulty that we must face is that our influence on the public culture of this country will always be quite limited – unless the entire nation is converted to the Faith, of course! For our political and

economic systems, our media, our public educational system, indeed most of the life of this society, were formed by non-Catholic or even anti-Catholic forces, and we have no power over them. But even in those aspects of life over which we do have control, the life of our parishes and our families, for example, there is one big obstacle which works against the establishment of a genuine Catholic culture here. This is the subject to which I will devote the bulk of this article.

Perhaps the best way to present the problem is this: it has been stated that Catholics in the United States are most fortunate because, since there are no native Catholic customs here, we can pick and choose beautiful customs from all over the Catholic world. And there exist books that describe these customs, from devotional practices to recipes for seasonal foods. Now the beauty and the advantages of this are obvious, but are there any disadvantages?

Unfortunately, when we can pick and choose our Catholic customs as we do our clothes, we are not participating in a Catholic culture so much as playing at having a Catholic culture. We are missing two essential elements of culture: its “givenness” and its corporate nature. In a village in Europe or Latin America that still maintains the Faith, the ways in which saints’ days and the seasons of the Christian year are observed are not a matter of choice. They are standard and expected and they are shared by the entire community. They are a part of the feast, not something to be added according to the taste of each family. And real customs are always like that. They cannot be fashioned to suit our fancies. But because we lack such a Catholic culture here, we lack such a set of customs or practices that are native to us.

It may occur to the reader that many of our ancestors in fact came from Catholic countries, and that therefore, in a way, there does exist a set of customs already determined for us, not simply chosen according to individual or family taste. Unfortunately, there are two difficulties with this. The most obvious, but not in my opinion the most grave, objection to simply adopting or reviving the customs of our ancestral homelands, is that for many of us, there is no organic link with those customs. At best, our parents may have kept up a few practices from the Old World, but this is at best. I myself am a convert, who has learned most of his Catholic culture from books or a few trips abroad. My wife, though a born Catholic, came from a “mixed marriage” – that is, her father was an Irish Catholic and her mother a Polish Catholic. As a result, they observed few customs of either land. I suspect that there are very few

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Italian or Polish or other European Catholic families in North America who have kept undiluted the practices of the past and thus for whom they are natural practices.

However, I do not think this is fatal, for though to adopt customs that have been dead for a generation or two would not be easy, I think it might be possible. But the second objection is more grave. This is that, with a few exceptions, these customs could not be corporate. For rarely do enough Catholics of similar ethnic background live near each other that they could create a real culture. Their ceremonies would be reduced to being private and not shared with their neighbors. This is not the culture of a community.

Below I will discuss those instances in which Catholics of the same national background do occupy the same locality in sufficient numbers to form a culture. But first I will turn my attention to the usual situation, that of mixed populations, drawn from all over Europe, and now, from all over the world. With our diverse backgrounds, it is hard to see how Catholic culture could ever be anything but the expression of individual taste or family tradition. But what, if anything, can we do about this? We cannot change what our ancestors did or create new surroundings for ourselves. Is there any way to construct a living Catholic culture here?

The great barbarian migrations that coincided with the end of the Roman Empire in western Europe produced countries and regions of very mixed populations. When the barbarians conquered and settled France or Spain, the old Romanized inhabitants still, of course, lived there. And at first the different peoples were very conscious of themselves and even lived under different laws, so that, for example, the penalty for a crime might differ depending on whether the victim or the culprit was from the old Romanized inhabitants or from one of the conquering barbarian tribes. But eventually the barbarians lost their connections with their original homelands and merged with the peoples whose lands they had conquered. Thus, though the Franks came from Germany and for a time kept up their German connections, eventually they mixed with the Romanized Gauls and both peoples became simply the French. There was no longer any *feeling* for Germany, even though many of them knew well enough that their ancestors had come originally from that country. Thus out of a mixture, a true people was formed with a genuine culture.

In parts of Asia another sort of process has taken place, but one which has also resulted in genuine cultures, though limited to smaller areas. There one can find differences in culture, ethnicity and religion among different villages in the same region. In the Middle East, for example, there might be a Catholic village, then a Muslim village, then a Druse village; in India there might be a Hindu, then a Muslim, then (in some regions) a Catholic village. But though the country, or even the region, might not share a uniform culture, each village does, and so its customs and culture still have the two essential elements of being corporate and of being given, that is, not a matter of choice.

Now the United States – and likewise most of Canada – is also a country of mixed population which in some ways has been formed into one people, but in other ways not. Although most Americans have similar cultural traits, it is the culture of the American Way of Life, and tends to focus on our attitudes toward money, success, geographical mobility and acquisition of material things. None of these is particularly characteristic of Catholic living. In fact, the way of life in the United States, under the influence of Protestantism and secularism, has lacked almost any of the sorts of customs that can be found in Catholic areas. Protestant religion, and thus Protestant culture, generally disdain outward symbols and expressions such as shrines or processions or other special observances, either of time or of place. What genuine cultural forms did exist in the United States, e.g., folk songs, were mostly eroded by commercialism beginning even in the 19th century. So that the tone of everyday American life has been set by work, by commerce and industrialism, not by faith of any kind. Although in Europe there might be special foods for numerous feasts of the Church year, here in the U.S. we have almost none of that. As a result, many immigrant peoples kept some identification with the customs of their ancestral lands, since it was either a choice of those customs or none. It was not as if an Italian Catholic had moved to Austria, where he would find a Catholic culture as rich as his own. Here in America there was nothing to replace the traditional customs brought from Europe, for America has virtually no traditional customs of that sort.

Today our identification with our origins in the Old World might go no deeper than displaying a bumper sticker that says “Kiss Me, I’m Irish,” but still, to the extent that we identify with the national customs of different parts of the world, we have not yet formed one people, and will have difficulty forming Catholic customs that are really native to

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this land. And of course, the new immigration from Catholic countries such as the Philippines or Mexico makes this even more the case. But if we are ever going to have a real Catholic culture here for the majority of Catholics, we must somehow achieve the two elements that define a real culture: it must be corporate or common and it must be handed down and not a matter of choice.

Can this be done, and if so, how? In my opinion it is possible, but difficult. In the first place what are the factors weighing against it? In addition to those I discussed above, they include widespread apathy, ignorance and heresy among Catholics, the noxious influence of television and other organs of the mass media, and the failure of the liturgy (of the Roman rite), in its current state, to nourish us in the Faith as well as it might. Even among the minority of Catholics who attend Mass every Sunday, there is little awareness that living a Catholic life includes more than certain liturgical, moral and perhaps spiritual norms (all necessary in themselves), but which are viewed in isolation and seen as exceptions to an otherwise entirely secular way of living and thinking. It is a tiny minority of the minority who desires to make their lives, as much as they can, an outward expression of the Faith. But what this minority of a minority *can* do is to begin to adopt and adapt Catholic customs, share them among themselves, and begin the slow process of creating genuine cultural practices that are common to more than a family and that can be passed down to their children as something simply given. These customs, of course, will be drawn from all over the world, from all parts of Europe, from Latin America, the Philippines, from Vietnam. But they will merge to become a truly North American Catholic culture.

Consider the few genuine holiday customs that do exist in the United States, for example, the Christmas tree. This symbol, though of German origin, has really become part of the American celebration of Christmas. It is now a true and organic and even Catholic custom. There are a few others of this sort, Easter eggs, perhaps the Advent wreath, though this latter is not as widely used. But this is the only way to acquire genuine organic customs for the community, by the slow process of certain customs catching on and being shared among Catholics in North America. There is no other way to develop a real living Catholic culture in countries of mixed population. And it is necessarily a slow work, and one that will not be completed in our time.

This will mean, moreover, that the family connections with Italy or Poland or Ireland will eventually die out completely. In a way this is very sad. I hate to see Hispanics or Filipinos become “Americanized.” Back at the end of the last century, German-American Catholic thinkers and writers devoted much attention to this question of Americanization. They were very much against any sudden or forced loss of the German language and customs, but they realized that in time this would happen; that it was inevitable that English would replace German. Otherwise there could never arise a true Catholic culture here. But of course I am assuming that, if we do lose these cultural connections with the Old World, we will really create a Catholic culture here. What must be avoided is to lose the Catholic customs of our homelands and to adopt nothing in their place except empty secularism and commercialism. Thus I definitely want to distinguish what I am advocating here from the program of the Americanizing Catholics of the late 19th century, such as Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, who wanted the newly arriving Catholic immigrants to conform as quickly as possible to the American Way of Life. I am not suggesting that Catholics conform to the way of life of our commercial and Protestant-secular society, but rather that we create a genuine and native Catholic culture here.

Moreover, as we draw upon the many Catholic cultures brought here from abroad to create an American Catholic culture, we will find that the varying customs of different Catholic countries often have a certain commonality, since they all reflect the same spiritual realities and the same Faith. They are often variations on the same theme, and thus can more easily be adopted and shaped for our newly-forming North American Catholic culture. Indeed, many of the elements of such a culture are part of the common patrimony of the Church, such as the use of sacramentals, the blessing of Easter food or blessing of homes. Some of these things can be initiated immediately, even without cooperation from the clergy. I must also point out the special role that Our Lady of Guadalupe ought to play in this, for as patroness of all the Americas she obviously will be the crown of any authentic Catholic culture in the New World.

There is no reason, however, that even if the mixed population of Catholics in North America does begin to form a culture by sharing and adopting customs whose origins lie in diverse lands, that this culture would be absolutely uniform throughout the continent. Even aside from the special cases that I will discuss below, where people of the same

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ethnic group are concentrated in sufficient strength that they can retain the culture of their homelands, there is bound to be diversity in such a large land area. The relative numbers of Catholics from different countries, as well as other factors, should dictate differing emphases in our nascent Catholic culture. For example, in some places the Irish would be the dominant factor in our Catholic “melting pot”; in other places it might be the Italians. In any case, it would be entirely in keeping with genuine Catholic culture were there to be differences between one region and another.

In addition to these local differences in our newly forming Catholic culture, there would be places where this process of forming a culture by adopting and adapting and sharing customs would not take place. For wherever enough Catholics with the same national heritage live in the same locality, obviously they would preserve and foster their own national Catholic cultures. Quebec is one such place; there are places in western Ohio of almost exclusively German Catholic population, and undoubtedly there are other similar places that I am unaware of, perhaps including a few of the old ethnic or national parishes. And most importantly, the increasing number of Hispanic Catholics entering this country suggests that wherever they are concentrated in large enough numbers to form a real culture, especially where they are the majority of the population, they ought to preserve their own Catholic culture. The customs of their countries of origin are still fresh in their minds and part of their way of life, and since they are *community* customs, they should be able to perpetuate a genuine Catholic way of life. Thus in parts of our southwest an Hispanic Catholic culture would become the norm. Others of the newly arriving immigrant Catholics, such as Vietnamese or Filipinos, if they settle areas in sufficient numbers to perpetuate the corporate character of their cultures, similarly ought to preserve them. Otherwise, they too must begin the slow process of merging with the heterogeneous Catholic body already here.

One aspect of the question that I must at least touch on is that of Catholics of the Eastern rites. Here it is not simply a question of culture, but also of ecclesiastical structures that presuppose and support cultures. In locales where enough Catholics of the same Eastern rite live together, what should be done is obvious. They would simply maintain their own distinct cultures. Where this is not the case, it seems to me that such Catholics ought to still preserve their own customs, because they are part of the public sign of the ecclesiastical rite. But as a Latin Catholic, not

intimately familiar with the situation of the Eastern Catholic churches, I do not feel competent to say much about their circumstances or the difficulties they face. In any case, they must not be overlooked as we survey the state of Catholics in North America.

I am sure that to many the creation of a Catholic culture such as I have sketched in this article seems more than utopian. When often we can barely preserve the teaching of the Faith in our local parishes, how can we expect to do anything on as grand a scale as I have suggested here? Well, I am not really suggesting that we can implement all this soon, perhaps never. But I see it as a kind of map which gives us the goal *toward* which we can strive. The actual things we can do now are to foster Catholic customs in our own homes, and whenever possible, with neighbors and fellow parishioners. Perhaps a few of us can actually work to form intentional Catholic communities here and there. The main thing is to know that our faith must reveal itself in our life, and in the life of our community, that Christ's Incarnation has implications for all of human culture. Then, no matter how much or how little we might achieve here, we have planted seeds that the next generation of Catholics might be able to foster, and at the same time, prepared ourselves for our heavenly kingdom, our true native land that lasts forever.

NOTES

¹ Published here for the first time.

² In David L. Schindler, ed., *Catholicism and Secularization in America: Essays on Nature, Grace and Culture* (Huntington, Ind. : Our Sunday Visitor, c. 1990), pp. 226-27.

CATHOLIC COLONY-MAKING IN 19TH CENTURY AMERICA¹

It is easier to be a Catholic here than in the mixed
and busy push of the towns and cities.

—John T. Reily in 1885, commenting on Conewago,
a very early Catholic settlement near the
Maryland border in Pennsylvania.²

From the nascent community in first century Jerusalem, which held all things in common (Acts 2:42-47), to efforts of today, Catholics have very often sought to establish explicitly Catholic communities, communities in which they could live out the Faith by establishing a way of life that corresponded with the teaching of the Gospel. And in some circumstances there was the additional reason that such separate communities were made necessary by the active hostility and persecution of surrounding society. In 19th-century America both the desire to live a way of life more in keeping with the Faith as well as the hostility of the surrounding Protestant society gave the impetus for the founding of many Catholic communities, and in this essay I will describe a few of them. This is certainly not an exhaustive account of Catholic colonization in the United States during the last century, but simply a brief survey and a highlighting of some of the episodes that seem to me most interesting and which give a flavor of what our fathers in the Faith did or attempted to do in times past.

The original European settlers of North America were, of course, Spanish Catholics, and those coming later included the Catholic French, and the English Catholics of Maryland. So in a sense all of their settlement could be called Catholic colonization. Moreover, these European Catholics evangelized the Native Americans and in many cases established Catholic communities for them. The French, for example, in order to protect their Indian converts from the still pagan atmosphere of their homelands, set up explicitly Catholic Indian villages near Montreal, and in Florida and elsewhere Indians converted by Spanish priests dwelt in Catholic communities.

In the English colonies the largest body of Catholics was, of course, the Maryland settlers. There, too, what might be called Catholic

communities were established for the Native Americans, for the second Lord Baltimore, Cecilius Calvert, forbade Europeans to settle on lands set aside for the Indians and gave these new converts Jesuits for their spiritual ministrations. Maryland, however, had had a Protestant majority from its beginning, and in time the Protestants seized control of the colony's government and began persecuting Catholics. After 1688 this policy became permanent, so some of the Maryland Catholics fled across the border to Pennsylvania and established a series of settlements centered on Conewago Chapel in Adams County. Toward the end of the 18th century these Conewago Catholics spawned the next Catholic community, the settlements in Cambria County, Pennsylvania.

One Michael McGuire, a Catholic from the Conewago area, who had been an officer in the Continental army during the Revolutionary War, founded a settlement in what is now eastern Cambria County, Pennsylvania, just west of Altoona. In 1799 Fr. Demetrius Gallitzin (1770-1840), a former Russian nobleman, a convert and one of the first priests ordained in the United States, visited McGuire's community and decided to buy land for further Catholic settlement in the area. His first and main community was Loretto, where he started a school, an orphanage, a store and a sawmill. Later other nearby towns were also colonized. Fr. Gallitzin would buy land from the government and resell it cheaply to his settlers. He spent all his money on his colonies and even anticipated his inheritance from Russia and spent it all before he found out that he would be disinherited under Russian law because of his Catholic ordination. Cambria County, in large part because of Fr. Gallitzin's efforts, is one of four counties in Pennsylvania whose population is over 50% Catholic, and, fittingly, Fr. Gallitzin's tomb is prominently placed in front of the parish church in Loretto.

Pennsylvania was the site of other Catholic settlements also. New Baltimore (originally Harman's Bottom) in Somerset County, begun about 1826; Silver Lake in Susquehanna County established in 1827; Neppenoe Valley in Lycoming County in 1836 by German Catholics; and among the more interesting, St. Mary's in Elk County, begun in 1842 by German Catholics from Philadelphia and Baltimore. Like Cambria County, Elk County's population is over half Catholic today, and St. Mary's is also deservedly well-known as the home of Straub beer.

There were many other attempted colonies, successful and unsuccessful, especially in different areas of the mid-west, from Ohio to Minnesota in the north and to Louisiana in the south. Many of these communities were founded by German-speaking Catholics from Switzerland, Austria and Germany, which at the time was divided into a

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number of independent states. In western Ohio German Catholics settled a belt along the Indiana border from Darke County north to Putnam County. Today this area is still a region of heavy Catholic population, and the only two counties in Ohio with populations over 50% Catholic, Mercer and Putnam, are both within this area of German Catholic settlement.

One village within this range of Catholic colonization is Delphos, Ohio, partly in Allen County and partly in Van Wert County. The colony at Delphos was begun in 1836 when a German priest, Fr. John Bredeick sent his brother Frederick to America to establish a German Catholic community. Frederick Bredeick purchased 92 acres for the future Delphos in an area that was already being settled by planned German Catholic communities. The first group of 42 people left Germany in August of 1842 and began clearing land for the future town the next spring. Fr. Bredeick, who was himself unable to leave Germany until 1844, had sent a second group of colonists in 1843, and he himself finally arrived the next year with a third group. Although from an early date non-Catholics have lived in Delphos, even today the Catholic high school, St. John's, is larger than the public high school.

Much of the southern part of this territory, centering in Mercer County, was colonized under the direction of a remarkable German priest, Fr. Francis Brunner. Like Fr. Gallitzin in Pennsylvania, Fr. Brunner was accused of being dictatorial in his methods and in the control of his settlers. But one can say on their behalf that such dedicated priests laid foundations that have lasted. If the Faith is dying in Mercer County, Ohio, and Cambria County, Pennsylvania, it is due to the problems in the larger Church and in the society, not to anything lacking in their founders' efforts or vision.

Another German community established in the mid-west was quite a bit different from Delphos, Ohio. This is St. Nazianz, Wisconsin, in Manitowoc County. This community was planned and established by Fr. Ambrose Oswald (1801-1873) in 1854. If people found the rule of Fr. Gallitzin or Fr. Brunner oppressive what would they have thought of Fr. Oswald's community? St. Nazianz was organized as a kind of membership community, with a constitution called the Statutes consisting of 29 sections. It included such as the following:

Section 8. Immorality and intemperance shall in no way be tolerated.

Section 9. The public morality shall be guarded by the Ephorate, which shall consist of twelve elders and the priest of the place.

Section 10. The Ephorate in its quality as Senate shall at the same time constitute the board of elders, which, together with the priest, shall manage the public affairs.

Section 11. Such persons as act contrary to the rules and public morality shall be warned three times by the Ephorate, and if without effect, shall be excluded from the association.

Section 15. The mode of living will be in common as much as possible.

Section 18. Swearing, cursing, quarrelling, fighting, suing, cheating, unchasteness and rudeness, contrary to a Christian life, will not be tolerated, over which the Ephorate shall guard carefully.

Section 20. Each member shall be assigned a position in the parish for which he shall be found suited.

Section 28. The priest of the place is president of the Ephorate. The president of the Senate holds the position of Mayor. The president and senators are elected by the parish.³

At first glance some of these rules might seem oppressive indeed, but I think that most of them would have been bearable in the context of an intentional Christian community. The rules also contained a strong purpose for social justice, including the following:

Section 6. The care of the poor, invalids, orphans and others in need shall be provided for, so that the poor shall receive the same care as the rich.

Section 7. Aid shall be given to one another in the obtaining of the most necessary things according to the instructions of the elders. No one shall suffer innocently. Each one shall receive aid when in trouble as soon as possible.

Section 22. Suppression and oppression will not be tolerated.⁴

Unlike many 19th-century European immigrants, Fr. Oswald's intentions were not primarily economic. He frequently told his flock, "We did not come to America to become rich, but to save our souls."

After Fr. Oswald's death in 1873 some dissident members of the community initiated a lawsuit to get some of the community's money and start a separate association. Over ten years later the legal battles were settled, with the rebel members getting only a small portion of what they had originally demanded. Toward the turn of the century membership in the original Association had dwindled, and the inhabitants, with the

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aid of the bishop of the diocese, invited the Salvatorian Order (S.D.S.) to take over the parish. The Salvatorians founded a seminary there and still remain.

In general the German Catholic immigrants and colonists were better off financially and better organized than were the Irish, and than the later arrivals, such as Italians and Slavs. The Irish were fleeing from persecution and famine and many of the eastern Europeans and Italians were very poor and were exploited on their arrival in the United States. But the Germans were more likely to be prosperous farmers or craftsmen, usually prepared their settlements well in advance, and sent over agents to check out conditions and buy land. However, there was one organized attempt to settle Irish Catholics in farming communities away from the big cities of the east coast. This was the Irish Catholic Colonization Association.

The Irish Catholic Colonization Association was founded in 1879 and ceased functioning in 1891. Its purpose was to settle Irish Catholics in the rural south and west and move them out of urban slums. With the backing of bishops John Ireland of St. Paul, Minnesota, and John Spalding of Peoria, Illinois, the Association bought 8,000 acres in Minnesota and 25,000 acres in Nebraska, although only a few families were actually settled on the land; only 150 families, for example, colonized the Nebraska tract. The Association also attempted to sponsor a colony in Arkansas, St. Patrick's, but legal difficulties in purchasing the land hindered its easy development, though some families did settle there. It is interesting to note, though, that some of those immigrating to Arkansas were from Kentucky, Missouri and Pennsylvania, that is, they already lived in rural areas and were not as much in need of escaping the cities as many other Irish.

Very interesting to note is that there were several settlements or communities of African Catholics in nineteenth century America, especially in Louisiana, but also in other states.

There were other communities of free people of color in southern Louisiana. They too were light-skinned, French, Roman Catholic, and often slaveholding. This phenomenon, perhaps with the exception of the owning of slaves, also existed in Alabama, Maryland, and possibly South Carolina; not all were French in these other places, but they were Roman Catholic.⁵

Colonizing efforts by Catholics in the 19th century should be viewed in the context of other such enterprises, for 19th-century America was full of attempts to found planned communities, some with more long-lasting

results than others. Everyone is aware of the Mormon founding of Salt Lake City, but before setting out into the wilderness they had had another community at Nauvoo, Illinois, from which they were driven out by hostile mobs. Other 19th-century communities in the U.S. included New Harmony, Indiana, Zoar, Ohio, Oneida, New York, Brook Farm in Massachusetts and the Shaker communities. Some of these were religious and others secular utopian or socialist.

For a member of a group which claims to know the most important truths the appeal of a community is obvious. The nexus of community in the United States is mainly negative, that is, the country is founded on freedom and limited government. But freedom leaves room for action based on numerous and contradictory desires, whether for money, pleasure, or for one sort of religion or another. With Americans having so many differing ideals there is not much of a place for cohesive community here. But for those with a religious or even a political creed that rises above such disparate and dissipative desires, there is naturally a longing for a life based on that creed, i.e., for a community explicitly founded on what its adherents believe to be true, rather than on the somewhat boring ideal of every man pursuing happiness according to his own fancy. American society from the beginning has put religion in an inferior place by making it a wholly private and individual affair. Whatever religion a man wanted, that was fine, so long as he did not attempt to intrude upon others. But in so saying, this perennial American creed proclaimed that in what was really important for the nation as a whole, religion, or at least any particular religion, would play no part. This can hardly be acceptable for anyone who really believes, so to escape such banality communities are founded. As Catholics we have additional reasons: the knowledge that our Faith is true and a long history of dealing with a multitude of political arrangements and of establishing communities of many kinds.

The American government, moreover, expects its citizens to play by its rules. In the fall of 1789 Father John Carroll, shortly to become the first Catholic bishop in English-speaking North America, and four important Catholic laymen, including his brother, Daniel, and his cousin, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, addressed a letter of congratulations to President George Washington. A few months later Washington replied by letter in a conciliatory manner. But our first President's reply included the following sentence:

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As mankind becomes more liberal, they will be more apt to allow, that all those who conduct themselves as worthy members of the Community are equally entitled to the protection of civil Government.⁶

Though no doubt meant in a generous sense, perhaps today we can see the mailed fist under the velvet glove here more clearly than could our brethren the Carrolls. For it appears more and more to be the case that in order to be considered “worthy members of the Community” we must keep our mouths shut about abortion, homosexual conduct, secular sex education and a host of other evils. Otherwise we are apt to have “the protection of civil Government” removed from us. As the culture of the United States decays further, and intolerance of Catholic moral teaching increases, harassment of our universities, schools, even our parades, increases. What are we to do? Before the Revolution the Carrolls had contemplated emigration to French Louisiana to escape the anti-Catholic laws of the English colonies. Where can we flee to, what community can we establish beyond the reach of our anti-Catholic laws? But if our first love is the welfare and future glory of Christ’s true Church, then the establishment of communities, even in the United States, can be a labor of that love, even if precarious political conditions threaten to make that labor of love lost. Anyway, we have no choice but to work and nourish the Mystical Body, as best we can, while leaving the outcome all to God.

NOTES

¹ Originally published in *Caelum et Terra*, vol. 3, no. 3, summer 1993

² *Conewago: A Collection of Catholic Local History* (Martinsburg, W.V.: Herald Print, 1885, 1970 reprinting), p. 28.

³ *St. Nazianz, 1854-1954* (St. Nazianz, Wisconsin, 1954?), pp. 17-19.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York : Crossroad, 1990), p. 77.

⁶ Quoted in Theodore Roemer, *The Catholic Church in the United States* (St. Louis : B. Herder, 1950), p. 102.

THE MIXED LEGACY OF THE 1960s¹

There are some who like to set the beginning of all evil in the culture of the United States from about 1966. Before that all was fine, the gray, conformist world of short hair and predictable advice from Ann Landers. Then came the 1960s and with it a tribe of evils that threatens to overwhelm American culture: casual and accepted unchastity, wide use of drugs, a me-first attitude – all things that are rapidly destroying whatever is good about America. This is a view that those who never liked anything about the 60s in the first place can now proclaim with considerable self-satisfaction as we see the bad fruits of that decade engulfing the culture.

And indeed, it seems to me that one must concede a certain point to this view. Widespread unchastity and drug use (along with rapacious economic injustice and environmental destruction) are among the most baneful things in the country today. They are chief causes of some of our worst problems, such as broken families and abortion. But, nonetheless, there is much more to recall about the 60s than that. Fairness, as well as efforts to understand what has happened to Western culture, require that both what was good and what was bad in that decade be remembered.

I was born in 1951, and thus during the late 60s and early 70s (I put the end of the 60s at about 1973, the beginning around 1964) much of my intellectual formation was taking place. I consider it a great grace to have grown up then, because there were unique good things taking place, most notably, a reaction against the Cartesianism long prevalent in the West, and as a result, something of a throwback to an earlier, and healthier, era in Western civilization. But before discussing that, I think it is important to say what was at the root of what occurred during the decade of the 60s.

The most basic description of what the 60s were all about, I think, is that they were an attempt to find out what was by nature in human affairs and what was simply by convention. What was really true or right, always and in every place, and what was simply a custom, even though some might mistake it for an eternal verity.

Now before the 60s considerable confusion had arisen in this regard. Ann Landers or Dear Abbey, for example, might condemn women not shaving their legs with the same vehemence with which they condemned

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adultery or divorce. Growing a beard could be the cause of losing one's job. Whatever was odd was bad, and what was unimportant was held to be as sacred as what was important. In fact, probably what was unimportant was held to be the more sacred. For if one professed a vague religiosity, it did not matter if one disbelieved every article of the creed. Provided that one shaved one's face and otherwise conformed to middle class norms, it was okay.

The late Protestant writer, Francis Schaeffer, described well the situation in the early 60s.

It became obvious to students in the early sixties that we were living in a post-Christian world. As students in Berkeley shouted in 1964, we are living in a plastic culture. The beat generation before them had been saying that, and now an entire student generation had become convinced of it. Students would return home from the university and ask their parents questions and would get only superficial answers: You must work like mad to get into the university. Why? So you can make money. But why should I want to make money? So you can send your children to the university. All too often personal peace and affluence were the only values that these young people saw in their parents, and they rightly were turned off.²

With a culture that was so shallow and was determined to enforce conformity in both essentials and nonessentials, it was to be expected that those who saw the error of this would try to discover what was true by nature and what was merely convention.³ Even in the errors and excesses of the 60s this was the case.

The matter of sex, for example. Obviously sex is natural to the human race, and in a culture that at that time tended officially to pretend that sex did not exist (remember the old TV shows with married couples sleeping in separate beds), it was natural to affirm the naturalness and goodness of sex. (This was particularly the case when an official ethic of denying sex coexisted with widespread hypocrisy. The young observed their parents' conduct and openly demanded what their elders practiced in secret.) But of course, given the strength of our concupiscible appetites (appetites that are good but blind), such an effort was bound to lead to considerable unchastity. But the unchastity was, in a sense, a by-product of the affirmation of sex. Of course such unchastity was wrong, but it was not always a purely self-centered thing. It often involved elements of the search for the natural as well as a search for community.

Obviously sex is a way of connecting to another individual, of creating a community. This effort to establish community was both predictable and good in a society that had atomized everyone with its economic competition, its fractured neighborhoods and its intellectual compartmentalization. Sex and drugs, as well as music, seemed like ways of overcoming that fundamentally atomized culture, though it is ironic that the counterculture did not see that the establishment culture's advertising slogan, "Better Living Through Chemistry," applied just as much to their use of drugs as to middle class abuse of over-the-counter sedatives and pain killers. But it is always easier to discern evils than to discover their true remedy, so one should judge the counterculture no more harshly than one does the establishment culture. The atomization of society that by the end of the 50s had become overwhelming in its oppressiveness was as great an evil as the mistaken attempts to overcome that atomization by the false sense of community created by drugs, the cult of music and unchastity.

Drugs and music, however, promised to overcome more than a human community broken into parts. They also promised to overcome what was seen as a life dominated by a rationality that focused only on process and was uninterested in ultimate ends or in truth. Now in fact this was not true rationality, but only a counterfeit, but a counterfeit that is still very much with us today.

Since the time of Descartes human reason has more and more been seen as merely a device that enables man to manipulate nature and other men for the sake of some end chosen by the will. The world was like the grid of Cartesian geometry. Given any equation on the X and Y axis, rationality could help one solve the equation and thus obtain one's desires, but could not help one recognize what was the good or what was the true goal of human life. Whether it was bigger bombs, faster cars or more potent drugs, the equation could be solved using the techniques of what was considered reason. Reason was nothing but the solving of equations against the background of the neutral, featureless world of Descartes, simply a method for gaining whatever one desired. With such a conception of reason and the intellectual life, it is no wonder that young people in the early 60s revolted against the very idea of the intellect.

The traditional Western idea of the intellect and reason, however, was far from the Cartesian notion of merely a technique for problem solving, unconscious of ethical norms. In Aristotle and other thinkers of

antiquity and the Middle Ages, the human intellect can in part apprehend what is good and what is true. Thus reason itself, properly understood, proclaims the sterility of the fragmented life of the modern West. It is true that things had gotten so bad that men could *feel* that something was wrong, but it does not follow from that that our feelings are trustworthy guides to what actually is the right way to live. It is easy for our feelings to deceive us, and when joined with our bodily appetites (good in themselves but blind guides), they produced a hedonistic, irresponsible life that very soon gave up whatever of idealism it may have had to become the self-centered pursuit of private pleasure that characterized the 70s and 80s.

Earlier in this essay I said that as a result of the rejection of Cartesianism during the 60s there was something of a throwback to an earlier age of Western culture, something that was healthy and worthy of continuation. This might be called a pre-bourgeois manner of life. More than one Catholic writer, most notably Christopher Dawson, has regarded the bourgeois spirit, which is one of the major aspects of modern living, as essentially alien to the Catholic spirit or the traditional life of the West. Dawson characterizes bourgeois culture in the following terms:

the distinctive feature of the bourgeois culture is its urbanism. It involves the divorce of man from nature and from the life of the earth. It turns the peasant into a minder of machines and the yeoman into a shopkeeper, until ultimately rural life becomes impossible and the very face of nature is changed by the destruction of the countryside and the pollution of the earth and the air and the waters.⁴

Now the counterculture of the 60s was clearly opposed to much of the bourgeois culture described here by Dawson. Though environmentalism is again popular today, at least some of its current vogue arises simply from the fact that there is no alternative. Even the most selfish, bourgeois, capitalist exploiter of nature can be made to see that if he continues his present course eventually he himself will be inconvenienced. Better to recycle than to die. But there need not be any real desire for a right relation with God's creation in this. But the counterculture did embody a real anti-bourgeois spirit, which can be most clearly seen, I think, in its attitude toward craftsmanship.

The desire to create artifacts by hand using tools and simple machines can be simply a nostalgia for the past, or it can be something deeper. It can involve a recognition that the relation between man and his work was fundamentally changed by mass production and the factory system, so that the products of nature were no longer worked *with*, as in one shaping wood into a bowl or a dulcimer, but were, in a sense, violated by massive machines in massive factories. Modern technology, the direct fruit of modern science, is interested in bending any reality totally to its will. Anyone who doubts that need only look at its dreams, though to me they seem like nightmares, as for example, slabs of meat “growing” in vats, divorced from any living animal. But how different is it to work by hand with wood or metal, not to mention living things, to know and respect their whatness, that is, their natures, what they are in themselves.

In *The Abolition of Man* C. S. Lewis wrote that he desired a science that “would not do even to minerals and vegetables what modern science threatens to do to man himself.”⁵ And in its return to craft industries and rural communes, the counterculture was instinctively seeking a way of life that revered the things that God made, as God made them. It is true that we are to make use of things, both living and nonliving, for our welfare. We may eat plants and animals, we may chop down trees and dig up rocks and metals. But surely to raise chickens, letting them run free in the yard, even though we may subsequently kill and eat them, is a far cry from packing them into buildings with artificial light and no room to move about, as is common today. And it is an even farther cry from the grotesque and obscene vats of “growing” meat which we may well face in the future.

The desire to know what is by nature, that is, what is really consonant with our humanity – with our human nature – and thus with all created natures; the desire for community; the desire to treat human work and the materials of human work with respect – these are what the 60s had to offer to Western man in the latter half of the twentieth century. But what Western man took instead was the mistaken means the counterculture used to try to attain the good that it perceived. Sex and drugs, as I said above, were misguided attempts to obtain the natural and to create community. But, however much one may be motivated by something good, original sin guarantees that, apart from grace, most men will not seek after the good for very long. Sex desired as a means for community very soon becomes sex desired for exploitative pleasure. Even during the heyday

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of the 60s women were exploited for masculine pleasure, however much slogans about destroying bourgeois hypocrisy or living naturally may have been mouthed. Indeed, though some counterculture groups have rejected contraceptives as the unnatural and anti-human devices that they surely are, it is hard to see how the widespread fornication of the 60s could have taken place without equally widespread contraceptive use. Thus the bourgeois products of bourgeois technology made possible the very centerpiece of the counterculture's attempt to regain nature.

And as the counterculture's decade gave way in the 70s to another era, the use of sex to tear down the edifice of hypocrisy became more and more an act of hypocrisy itself. For the establishment culture no longer bothered to pretend that sex did not exist or pretend to chaste use of it. The establishment types simply decided that there was nothing wrong with all the sex of the counterculture, so why shouldn't they join in the fun too? It was the same with drugs. They no longer were the outward sign of a confused search for community, but now just something to do to keep from being bored. The establishment found that promiscuous sex and drugs could coexist well enough with MBAs and corporate jets. And as the members of the counterculture moved into their late twenties, they found there was little or nothing in their principles which prevented them from enjoying the best of both worlds too. Keep the sex and drugs and take the money too. It was too good to resist. Had there been much of intellect in the 60s rejection of the establishment, instead of intuition and feeling, then more people might have seen through the massive sellout that occurred. Or had many turned to the Catholic faith, the only living thing in Western culture capable of withstanding the bourgeois spirit, then the recent history of our country and our civilization would have been very different. But as it is, the enduring value of the 60s lies in what the era can show us about actually living in a non-bourgeois manner, not in any living survivals of its spirit. With a few exceptions what was valuable in the 60s has not survived, but the good that was achieved, amidst all its errors and excesses, always remains as an inspiration and illustration of what might be done. Even in the midst of the new bourgeois age, those who learned well the lessons the 60s had to teach, and have rejected its errors, can themselves point out truths our culture has never absorbed and thus can never transmit.

NOTES

¹ Originally published in *Caelum et Terra*, vol. 2, no. 2, spring 1992.

² *The New Super Spirituality* (Downers Grove, Ill. : Inter-Varsity, c. 1972), p. 3.

³ “Indeed, the heritage of values which has been received and handed down is always challenged by the young. To challenge does not necessarily mean to destroy or reject *a priori*, but above all to put these values to the test in one’s own life, and through this existential verification to make them more real, relevant and personal, distinguishing the valid elements in the tradition from false and erroneous ones, or from obsolete forms which can be usefully replaced by others more suited to the times.” John Paul II, Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, no. 50.

⁴ “Catholicism and the Bourgeois Mind” in *Dynamics of World History* (La Salle, Ill. : Sherwood Sugden, c. 1958, 1978 ed.), pp. 202-203.

⁵ (New York : Macmillan, c. 1947), pp. 89-90.

WESTERN CULTURE AND THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM¹

The Chicago Great Books list . . . illustrates rather well the tension between acculturation and the love of wisdom. Often this list is defended as embodying humankind's highest wisdom on the perennial questions. While this explains very well the inclusion of some authors, the tilt to North and West European and North American authors roughly half way through the Great Books seems much better explained as a victory for acculturation over philosophy. These latter are the authors one needs to know in order to function in North American civilization. Obviously, the adequacy of this observation depends on what one thinks of the intrinsic merits of writers like David Hume and J.S. Mill. For one like myself, who suspects that the more important an idea is, the more unlikely it will be that the Anglo-Saxon tradition has dealt adequately with it, it will be hard to be convinced that acculturation has not had its way with the love of wisdom.

– Glen W. Olsen²

The above statement by Professor Olsen about “the tilt to North and West European and North American authors” in the University of Chicago great books list has a much wider application than to that list alone. One finds the same situation in the curriculum of St. John's College, the first U.S. institution of higher education to institute a complete great books curriculum, as well as (one regrets to say) in the curriculum of the premier Catholic great books school. But this “tilt” can also be found outside of the great books curriculums; indeed, I will argue that some such “tilt” is almost universal in U.S. higher education, causing us to have a distorted picture of our own heritage as well as revealing much about our Protestantized and secularized national soul. But let me begin again and with a different point of departure.

For the past several years a controversy has been raging in the United States over the place of Western³ culture in the university curriculum. Critics of what is called our traditional curriculum charge that it is culturally biased toward the West or even that it is racially biased toward the so-called white race. It is said to reflect a Western, capitalist and masculine view of the world and to present only the tradition of the historically dominant group. The views and traditions of African Americans, women, Native Americans and Hispanics, among others, are

said to have been excluded. These critics maintain that not only must the works and ideas of such “marginal” groups be read and discussed in universities, but the notion of Western culture as better or normative must be discarded. Now by no means would I endorse most of the premises and conclusions of these enemies of Western civilization, but I think to conclude that because they are mostly wrong therefore their opponents are simply right would be too simplistic. For this controversy gives us an opportunity to raise some questions about what sort of curriculum is being attacked and defended in the first place. Particularly is this so since apparently many Hispanics have been shanghaied into joining the movement demanding the removal of Western ideas and civilization from the curriculum. And of course the way they have been persuaded to join in such demands is that they were first convinced that they themselves are not a part of Western culture, that they are a non-Western minority. The fact that any sizeable number of Hispanics was so persuaded says more, I think, about our own image of Western civilization than it does about any gullibility on the part of Hispanics. For the proposition that Hispanics are a non-Western ethnic group is preposterous. That the very people who brought Western civilization to the Americas, who brought the Catholic faith, universities and the study of scholastic philosophy, European music, architecture and cities—in short, the entire array of late medieval European culture—that they should be widely held not to be Europeans and Westerners is absurd. Peru, Mexico and Santo Domingo were thriving centers of Western civilization, with universities and printing presses, while Harvard was still an uncultivated field with no Europeans around at all. Nor can one take refuge in the notion that while Spaniards might be Westerners, Latin Americans are not, for only a most superficial view of Latin America fails to see in it Spanish culture, albeit transformed. “A glance . . . is enough to show that the unity of Spanish America is rooted in its common Spanishness.”⁴

How then can anyone maintain that Hispanics are not of the West? At least in part, the reason is the selectivity and one-sidedness in our own understanding of the West and thus in our presentation of what the Western heritage is to our young. And this might lead us to question whether our curriculum really does give Western culture the pride of place that both its defenders and its critics seem to assume it does. If we do so we will discover that there is ample reason to accuse the current American college or university of selectivity in its coverage of the West, and of identifying our civilization with only a few European countries and a few European ideas. If this fact forms even a small part of the reasons or the pretext for Hispanics to think that European civilization is not

their civilization, then the grave harm done by that selectivity should be evident. Moreover, we will discover, I think, that this selectivity in our understanding is part of a fear and hatred of our own past, especially of our traditional Western religion, the Catholic faith.

When North Americans, whether scholars, journalists, or others, have looked at other countries, how have we tended to classify them? Generally by their presumed stage of *economic development*. Thus we have such concepts as “developed” and “developing” and “the Third World” – a classification that puts Peru or Mexico in the same category as India or Zambia, despite their very dissimilar cultures.⁵ Now it might be that for certain limited economic purposes such a classification is useful. But it is almost the only kind of classification we use beyond the merely geographical. And when we speak of the West, instead of referring to those countries and regions with a civilization derived ultimately from Greco-Roman culture and the Catholic faith, we mean only a political or economic bloc with a certain level of economic development and similar political systems. Of course, most Americans are so ignorant as not to know much about the European heritage of Latin America nor do they go beyond the shallowest of journalistic classifications. Thus it is no surprise that we see the West as we do, with little or no attention paid to any coherent concept of its cultural origins or cultural unity. In fact, our ideas of the West have been formed by the last few centuries, the centuries marked by an increasing Protestant and secular ascendancy. We do not see *ourselves* as heirs in any true sense of the Christian and classical West. Instead we see the value of that past as lying solely in how we think it has contributed to our own way of life, e.g., Pericles’s funeral oration in Thucydides or the Magna Carta merely as precursors of our liberal and democratic society. We do not value the Middle Ages for itself or for its thought. On the contrary, we rejoice in that we believe we have escaped from that obscure and oppressed era. But what of Latin America in contrast?

Our country’s culture stems from the late stages of the English Protestant Reformation and its bastard children – empirical rationalism and the Industrial Revolution. It has, therefore, in the main, the traits of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and is indigenous to our dominant race. The culture of America Hispana, insofar as it is European, derives from the Catholic Renaissance of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Hispana (the term includes Portugal); in energy and values it is a direct transplantation of Queen Isabel’s crusade against the Moors.⁶

Because our concept of the Western world is based only on freedom and technology – the values which ultimately survived from Protestantism – we look on Latin Americans only in geographical or economic terms. We see what we think are poor or dirty or corrupt Mexicans; we do not see the transoceanic children of Spain’s Golden Age. Moreover, if we have even heard of the Siglo de Oro we would not admire its culture but damn it as an Inquisition-ridden era.

It is of enduring consequence that our country was founded in revolt against Catholicism, against the layered and corporative society, against casuistical justice, against tolerance of sin in the human community, against individual eccentricity and affective release – against the whole late-medieval world . . . which is still largely a reality for Hispanic peoples. Seventeenth-century Ibero-America stood for everything which Anglo-America had set itself fiercely against . . . Our present *doctrinal* diversity and toleration obscure for us the fact that we are integrally a Protestant nation, insensitive and vaguely hostile to the *sociological* and *psychological* foundations of a Catholic society.⁷

If, then, it is true that North Americans have conceived of their civilization and heritage as in reaction against those things that are still the foundations of Latin American culture, it is no wonder that we have not seen them as sharing the same culture as ourselves, and that therefore we have not included their books, their art, their history, their civilization in what we call the study of the Western world.⁸ Very little of the products of the Hispanic mind are read outside of the specialized study of Spanish literature, with the exception of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and José Ortega y Gasset’s *The Revolt of the Masses*. As Professor Olsen says in regard to the Great Books list, “There was nothing of Latin American thought and literature” nor any mention of “the robust intellectual life of Southern or Eastern Europe.”⁹ One does not usually find writers such as St. Teresa or St. John of the Cross, not to mention Vives, Suárez, Lope de Vega, Calderón, Balmes, Donoso Cortés, Rodó or Unamuno covered in general literature or philosophy courses.¹⁰ If these authors, and many others, have been excluded from the standard U.S. university curriculum, then our society has not been presenting true Western culture to its students, for these authors have at least as much right to be considered voices of Western civilization as do Englishmen or North Americans.¹¹ So it is little wonder that many Hispanics have concluded that they are not part of Western culture. Indeed, perhaps they are not part of what we mean by Western culture. But it is

just as hard to see how Cicero and Virgil or St. Augustine and St. Thomas would have felt much at home in the North America that we have built, or indeed, in the North America of the last three centuries. In defending Western culture in the university the solution, however, is not for Hispanics to cut their Western ties and cast themselves adrift as a supposed non-Western minority, something in any case that is not really possible. The solution is for the rest of us to look at Western culture as it really was and is, not just those parts that were precursors of our technological, atomistic, Protestant civilization.

This issue, however, raises the question of our universities' relations with our European tradition as a whole. I would suggest that for the most part the universities are alienated from our own tradition, and their treatment of the Hispanic world is simply a symptom of that fact. It would be hard, as a matter of fact, for things to be otherwise, for into the 18th century and in some cases even beyond, a considerable part of Western tradition was essentially Christian and preoccupied with what are today largely regarded as trivial irrelevancies. This is true even of some of the thinkers, such as Newton, who can be claimed as the forerunners of modern secular thought. Though to a large extent they have furthered the development of secularism, usually unwittingly, they still thought of themselves as Christians, and they will often be misunderstood if this is forgotten.

Not only are the issues that were important to our ancestors ignored today as live issues, but our institutions of higher education are not even focused on our rich past and its thinkers as an historical fact, a body of learning which we must understand and come to terms with, but rather are designed to initiate their charges into the skeptical worldview that began with the so-called Enlightenment of the 18th century. This the entire ordinary U.S. educational curriculum is dedicated to, even when it does not directly attack religion or believers. The study of our past is not an effort to discover what wisdom our ancestors may have to pass down to us, or even to understand ourselves and our times in terms of our heritage. No, for the thinkers of the past are not usually taken seriously as thinkers on their own terms, and the variety and alteration of philosophies and systems becomes just one more argument for a pervasive relativism. Anything of value in European thought is assumed to lie in what can be considered preparation for modern liberal democracy, with its concomitant political, personal and economic freedoms, and for science and technology. Thinkers are studied and praised if they contributed to these things and ignored or vilified if they did not. Particularly is

this the case for thinkers who are outside the limited area of Great Britain, France, Germany and the U.S. If a Spanish or Italian thinker has contributed to secularism, then perhaps he will be studied, but otherwise not.

Thus we are cut off from our own direct ancestors nearly as much as from the culture of Iberia and its American colonies, because in the institutions and culture of the Iberian world historic Western civilization survived much longer and still, to some extent, survives today. But not with us. It has been suggested that our neglect of the Hispanic world in our studies is connected to our furtive doubt whether we ourselves chose the right path when we departed from the genius that had hitherto guided the West.

For we must conclude that the North American who looks South wrestles with an insidious doubt. Even in the face of the cruelty, poverty, and tumult of Latin America, he cannot escape the lurking suspicion that *it is just barely conceivable that his own ancestors may have taken a wrong turn in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*. We never had the opportunity to be Japanese or Hindu. But once upon a time we *were* within the mother Church. Whatever we gained by leaving it, we were forced to cauterize some of those early instincts, to abandon some of that immemorial social wisdom, in which the Latin-American world abounds. Latin America confronts us with much that we swept under the rug, with much that might still have been ours. Can it be, can it possibly be, that our several strategies for keeping Latin America at an intellectual and psychic remove were devised to obscure this simple fact?¹²

Whatever one thinks of the psychological theorizings of the author, it is the case that our own culture was once more like that of Latin America than like that of today's North America. Medieval England, for example, was not a budding version of the secular state, but a fully Catholic nation with all the external Catholic life of monasticism, shrines, processions and so forth that have historically characterized Spain or Latin America. But of course it is that part of medieval England that we pay least attention to as we look back hoping to find early evidences of liberal democracy and secular rationalism.

Above I quoted Professor Olsen's statement that "it will be hard to be convinced that acculturation has not had its way with the love of wisdom." That is, the resources of the North American university curriculum are devoted to acculturating or socializing its students to live and work in secular North America. How could it be otherwise? No society

is going to devote large sums of money to an enterprise which does not serve one of that society's goals. And in the United States the resources that are devoted to college or university education are in fact used to foster an education that is basically pre-occupational, what we call vocational. That is, courses of study in business administration, hotel management, agricultural engineering, as well as law and medicine.¹³ Even most of the courses in mathematics or the natural sciences are viewed as having some technological or economic benefit, not for whatever speculative¹⁴ knowledge they might yield. Legislators justify spending for higher education on the grounds that it is necessary in order to keep the country competitive, the latest catchword of the day. Very little comparatively is spent on the study of theology or philosophy or literature or even history. The reason, of course, is that a civilization spends money on what it considers important. And as materialists it is easy for us to see the value of getting a job or promoting national competitiveness. But who would subsidize an education that looked critically at the roots of our culture, an education which might in fact prove subversive of secular rationalism and the technological society that it has spawned?¹⁵

In sum, the Western culture that we present in our institutions of higher education is a Western culture that seldom discomfits the secularized North Americans of the twentieth century. We leave out the products of Hispanic culture, yet we also do not take seriously *any* of the works of Western culture that would disturb us. All this is witness to how far we ourselves, the self-proclaimed heirs of the West, are actually cut off from that culture created by the fusion of the Catholic faith and Greco-Roman learning. If we value education chiefly for its occupational benefits, that is because our civilization values tangible things. Any educational system reflects the culture in which it is placed and which gave it birth and sustains it. But if we have any desire to recall Hispanics to their own genius, that is, to the great civilization which they carried to this hemisphere, and at the same time to recall ourselves to that heritage which once shaped us, then a place to begin might be in our own educational and intellectual endeavors. If we remember our historic cultural bonds with the Latin mind and eschew all the talk about which nation is developed and which is not – then we just might look differently not only at those nations south of us, but at our own as well and try to discern in both not factories and financial centers but instead look for the knowledge and study of God, of truth, of the love and learning that built cathedrals and knew that the highest use of the human intellect was simply to gaze upon God and rest forever in him.

NOTES

¹ Originally published in *New Oxford Review*, vol. 62, no. 9, November 1995, under the title “Why Hispanics are Not ‘Politically Correct.’”

² “The University as Community: Community of What?” *Communio*, vol. 21, no. 2, summer 1994, p. 353.

³ The term *Western* culture seems preferable to *European* culture, because although Europe has always been the center of Western civilization, numerous important figures lived outside of Europe, even in ancient times. St. Augustine, for example, did most of his work in Africa; saints Basil and John of Damascus, among many others, in Asia. And since the late 15th century, Western civilization has existed in the Americas and elsewhere. Nevertheless, for the sake of variety, I will sometimes speak of *European* civilization, but meaning the same as Western civilization.

⁴ Salvador de Madariaga, *Latin America Between the Eagle and the Bear* (New York : Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), p. 63.

⁵ “Some countries or parts of countries in Latin America may have per-capita incomes as low as any in Africa or Asia. But Latin America differs from them in that its basic social, political and economic values come from the European tradition. Three hundred years of colonization by Spain and Portugal, more than one hundred and fifty years of independent life inspired by European and American ideals, and the important contributions by European immigrants, have produced a continent of many races unified by a common set of values inspired by Western Christian culture.” Horacio H. Godoy, “Latin American Culture and Its Transformation” in Samuel Shapiro, ed., *Cultural Factors in Inter-American Relations* (Notre Dame : University of Notre Dame Press, c. 1968), p. 167.

⁶ Waldo Frank, “The Hispano-American’s World” in Lewis Hanke, ed., *History of Latin American Civilization*, vol. 2 (Irvine : University of California, c. 1967), pp. 328-329.

⁷ Richard M. Morse, “The Two Americas Are Far Apart,” in Hanke, ed. *History of Latin American Civilization*, vol. 2, p. 358 (emphasis in original).

⁸ “The Catholic and Protestant worlds have been divided from one another by centuries of war and power politics, and the result has been that they no longer share a common social experience. Each has its own version of

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history, its own social inheritance, as well as its own religious beliefs and standards of orthodoxy. And nowhere is this state of things more striking than in America, where the English Protestant North and the Spanish Catholic South formed two completely different worlds which had no mental contact with one another.” Christopher Dawson, *The Dividing of Christendom* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image, c. 1965), p. 13.

⁹ Olsen, “The University as Community,” pp. 347-48.

¹⁰ This is not even to mention the study of Spanish and Latin American *history*, a subject often ignored in U.S. college curriculums. But insofar as U.S. higher education does pay attention to Spain, one might wonder whether it is not chiefly to foster errors and myths about the Hispanic world, such as the so-called Black Legend, the notion that the Spanish conquistadors and Spain’s colonial empire were embodiments of cruelty and exploitation of the Indians.

¹¹ Lately some literary products of Latin America are being more widely read in U.S. universities, such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, by the Guatemalan, Rigoberta Menchú. But this work, far from presenting traditional Latin American civilization, is in large part designed to further the politically-correct view of Latin America created by North American secularists.

¹² Richard Morse, “The Two Americas Are Far Apart,” p. 360 (emphasis in original).

¹³ The percentage of college freshmen whose “probable field of study” is the arts and humanities has declined from 16% in 1970 to 9% in 1997. *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1998 ed., table 318.

¹⁴ Speculative knowledge means knowledge that is for the sake of being looked at, i.e., knowledge for its own sake, not for the sake of some further end. It does *not* mean knowledge that is uncertain or the result of guesswork, which is what the modern connotation of speculative suggests.

¹⁵ Compare the statement of Horace Frommelt, written over seventy years ago, that Catholic colleges depended so much on financial contributions of capitalists that “it has become absolutely impossible to teach the least bit of doctrine subversive to its [capitalism’s] unholy nature.” Quoted in Rory T. Conley, *Arthur Preuss, Journalist and Voice of German and Conservative Catholics in America, 1871-1934* (New York : Peter Lang, 1998), p. 200. Frommelt’s remarks were originally published in his article, “Ignored Problems of Catholic Higher Education,” *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 28, no. 21, November 21, 1921, pp. 381-83.

THE MEANING OF THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL REVIVAL¹

At the beginning of the 1960s the Catholic Church was proudly riding the crest of a wave that had begun slowly and tentatively in the early 19th century. The Catholic Church and the Catholic people had intellectual confidence, organizational strength and even had, or seemed to have, great spiritual depth. This wave of confidence and institutional vigor was the result of that remarkable period or movement known as the Catholic Intellectual Revival or the Catholic Literary Revival. But the former term is better, since it was a revival in more than just belles-lettres, and included theology and philosophy, history and social theory. The revival began in the early 19th century as a number of notable European intellectuals, many with ties to the Romantic movement, converted or returned to the Faith of their baptism. These included the German poet and critic Friedrich von Schlegel in 1808, the Italian poet and novelist Alessandro Manzoni in 1810, the German poet and novelist Clemens Brentano in 1817 and, of course, John Henry Newman in 1845. They and their followers fostered a revival of Catholic intellectual life that lasted well into this century, and deserves to be counted as one of the great periods in the Church's history.

The unique quality of this intellectual revival can be seen when one considers Catholic writers and thinkers of the 18th, or even the 17th, century. Yes, there were many saints and spiritual writers, but how many distinctively Catholic literary figures, philosophers or social theorists from those centuries are remembered today? Practically all the well-known thinkers, even in Catholic countries, were secularists.² But beginning in the early 19th century the Church produced or attracted an unusually brilliant array of writers and thinkers. In addition to those already mentioned, there were in France Leon Bloy, Jacques Maritain, Charles Péguy, Georges Bernanos, Paul Claudel, Francois Mauriac; in England, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Hilaire Belloc, Robert Hugh Benson, G. K. Chesterton, Ronald Knox, Vincent McNabb, Christopher Dawson, Evelyn Waugh; in Germany, Gertrud von Le Fort, Karl Adam, Edith Stein, Josef Pieper, Romano Guardini; in Italy, Luigi Sturzo; in Scandanavia, Sigrid Undset and Johannes Jorgensen; in Poland, Henryk Sienkiewicz; in the U.S., Orestes Brownson, John A. Ryan, Dorothy Day and Flannery O'Connor – and this is far from a complete list. The eminence of this group is proven by its containing three Nobel prize

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winner, Henryk Sienkiewicz in 1905, Sigrid Undset in 1928 and Francois Mauriac in 1952. Others of this group have also received widespread recognition in secular circles, including Newman, Hopkins, Claudel and Waugh.

Many of this group were converts to the Faith, and the fact that so many eminent writers and intellectuals turned to the Church during this time shows the outstanding quality of Catholic thought. In fact, the Church received what is probably the most certain sign of respect from the world during this era, the existence of “fellow travelers,” writers – such as Henry Adams, Ralph Adams Cram, T.S. Eliot, Henri Bergson, Simone Weil, Robert Maynard Hutchins, Mortimer Adler – who never became Catholics, but who identified with one or more aspects of Catholic thought or life, ranging from Thomistic philosophy to medieval cathedrals to Catholic social principles.

The revival produced not only a multitude of important books and periodical articles, but new publishing houses, journals, Catholic communities, institutes and movements of all kinds. Quite often the important spade work done by these thinkers ultimately was ratified and bore fruit in papal encyclicals and the documents of the Second Vatican Council. But aside from any interest to historians, does this period of Catholic revival have any special significance for Catholics at the end of the 20th century and as we enter the 21st century? I think it does, and I would like to examine several aspects of that revival to see what lessons and importance it has for us.

It seems to me that the outstanding feature of Catholic thought during this period was its self-confidence. We believed – and I think with reason – that in the Church and in her thought and way of life, there existed a perfect answer and alternative to the modern secular world. The nonsense of so much of modern philosophy was perfectly answered by the levelheaded defense of reality contained in the tradition of Aristotle and Thomas; the idle dispute over how much the government should regulate economic life was solved brilliantly by the Catholic social principles of subsidiarity and economic self-government by means of occupational groups; the cultural disintegration of modern times found its remedy in the cultural unity promoted by so many artists and embodied in actual movements and communities.

Furthermore, Catholic thought was taken seriously by those outside the Church. Aside from the converts and “fellow-travelers” which I have already mentioned, Catholics were numerous and powerful enough that our positions in philosophy and political theory could not be entirely

ignored. Nor was it only the Catholic intelligentsia which was imbued with this intellectual self-assurance. Enough of their thought, and of the elementary distinctions of theology and philosophy, had penetrated the body of the Catholic faithful, that ordinary Catholics were more likely to be clearheaded in their thinking, and sure of themselves when encountering outsiders. How one longs for this when one meets with the mush that passes for so much of Catholic thinking today!

In addition, we Catholics of the latter half of the century are still the intellectual and literary heirs of those giants. That is, orthodox Catholics of today, and I suspect well into the future, will usually take as their point of departure a point that was reached during this revival. We can see *that* this is true simply by looking at the catalogs of Catholic publishing houses, for example. How many works of Gilson, Pieper, Chesterton, Belloc, Undset and others are being reprinted today. How often are they referred to in books and articles. But why is this so? We take them as the context and point of departure for so much of our own work, I think, for this reason. These writers and thinkers mediated and (in the proper sense) updated so much of tradition for us, showed us its relevance to the modern world, and in doing this formulated a Catholic response to the unique problems of modernity, a response that is still valid and useful.

Catholic tradition can mean at least two different things. It can mean tradition in the proper sense, Sacred Tradition, which along with Scripture “make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God.”³ But it can also be used in a wider sense, and it is in this latter sense that I am using it here. Tradition in this second sense means all the vast treasury of Catholic thought and activity, writings and actions, from apostolic times till the present. Now no one is completely master of all this. There is so much richness of theology, philosophy, liturgy, literature and how many other subjects, that no one person could bring order out of all of this. And I think that if we were simply confronted by this huge mountain, most of us would despair of making anything out of it. But one thing that the work of the Catholic revivalists did for us is to mediate this tradition as the Church began to face the absolutely unique challenge presented by the modern world.

From about the end of the 17th century until the first quarter of the 19th, the Western world underwent a transformation that in most ways was more profound than that which occurred at the end of antiquity.⁴ For both classical antiquity and the Catholic Middle Ages, and even the Renaissance and Baroque era, basically accepted a religious approach to

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reality which subordinated man to the divine, recognized an objective moral order and strove to embody in their political arrangements the stability that they assumed was desired by all. With the coming of modernity all this was changed. Now there are no longer any boundaries and landmarks for human thought. Yesterday it was debunking of human reason and motives by behaviorism, today it is deconstruction of texts and meaning, tomorrow it may be anything – how many different systems and approaches have arisen since the original rebels, the mathematical philosophers of the 17th century and the Encyclopedists of the 18th began to write. The bulk of Catholic tradition, however, necessarily does not address the manifold problems and ideas of modernity, since it predates it. As a result, it sometimes does not seem to have any relevance to us now. Often it is necessary to dig a little to discover just how something can be applied to our situation today. An example will make things clearer.

Josef Pieper in his discussion of the Thomistic distinction between commutative and distributive justice in *The Four Cardinal Virtues* takes the seemingly dry distinctions of the medieval doctor and shows their importance for critical political choices of the twentieth century. Consider the following:

The individualist's criticism would be that there are in reality only individuals, and that, when an individual confronts the social totality, one individual confronts many individuals. For him the social whole is not a reality of a special order. Therefore he admits of only one single type of justice – commutative justice – because individuals always have to do with other individuals.⁵

Here is St. Thomas' distinction aptly used to describe today's libertarians, who see only relations among atomistic individuals, with the state being at best a sort of joint stock corporation, not a body existing in its own right. And on the other hand, Pieper goes on to characterize those who would deny commutative justice, making all relations among men examples of distributive justice.

the collectivist . . . interpretation predicates that there is no such thing as an individual capable of entering into relationships in his own right. Above all, no private relations between individuals exist.⁶

Here is the modern totalitarian or collectivist, who is so blinded by the necessity for the state that he fails to see that the state exists for the

sake of civil society, not vice versa, and that there exist many relations between man and man into which the state does not enter directly.

Thus the writers of the Catholic revival, direct heirs of the Catholic ages and yet confronting for the first time an entirely changed situation, were forced to go beyond an unreasoning repetition of principles, however true, or the application of solutions to problems that no longer existed. Out of the many areas in which these writers worked, I will discuss two that illustrate how they creatively used and adapted tradition to produce orthodox solutions to challenges which the Church encountered for the first time in the modern age.

First biblical studies. Through most of antiquity and the Middle Ages Catholic writers were able more or less to take for granted the historical truth of the narratives contained in Holy Scripture. But with the nineteenth century, the modern world attacked the Church and indeed all Christians with a direct frontal assault. Biblical criticism, chiefly in Germany, called into question this traditional untroubled acceptance of the historicity of the biblical narratives, especially of the Old Testament. And, indeed, it does seem likely that not all events that are related in the Old Testament happened exactly as the story seems to say they did. But if this is so, then what becomes of the Church's teaching, a teaching solemnly repeated even in our own day, that everything affirmed by the sacred text is true, even matters of history or science? Here the Magisterium of the Church itself, in particular Pope Pius XII, building on the work of early twentieth-century scripture scholars, found in certain parts of the Catholic biblical tradition principles which would both uphold the truth that all scripture is true as written, yet would not require Catholics to be biblical fundamentalists, necessarily believing, for example, that Adam and Eve had disobeyed God by eating a literal piece of fruit or that Joshua had caused the sun to stand still in the heavens for 15 minutes. Pius XII did this by elaborating the concept of the *literary form*, a concept more or less implicit in the writings of Augustine and Aquinas, but which needed to be considerably developed so that Catholics could see just what was and what was not worthwhile in modern biblical criticism. In brief, this concept, first taught in the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of 1943, holds that though all assertions made in Scripture, on whatever subject, are true, yet not every passage in the historical books of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, was ever meant by God and their human authors to be understood

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literally, as we would understand historical works written today. As Pope Pius wrote,

Not infrequently . . . when some persons reproachfully charge the Sacred Writers with some historical error or inaccuracy in the recording of facts, on closer examination it turns out to be nothing else than those customary modes of expression and narration peculiar to the ancients, which used to be employed in the mutual dealings of social life and which in fact were sanctioned by common usage.⁷

Even today we retain a few such types of expressions, as when we say “I’ll be with you in a minute,” or “it’ll take years to do that,” never intending this to be taken literally. The writers of the Old Testament used many more such expressions, for example the recurring phrase “forty years,” nor were such idioms limited to expressions of time. The present-day author of a fictional biography of an historical figure, for example, does not intend that everything he positively states be taken as literally true, because in such a genre it is common practice to invent certain details or conversations to embellish the story line; similarly sometimes God and the human author of scripture most probably used a kind of discourse that, while not making the narrative false or unhistorical, does mean that it must be held to different canons of historical or scientific truth from what we expect from a newspaper account of an event or an article in *Scientific American*. We do not call an historical novel false if it follows the rules of its own genre nor should we call an Old Testament narrative false if it follows the literary forms current at the time it was written. Of course, the application of the principle of literary forms can be abused, for example by attempting to rob the sacred text of its real historical value, but the principle itself is entirely sound.

The second area I will mention in which Catholics brilliantly mined our tradition to find answers to modern questions was social teaching. Though they were not primarily concerned with such questions, the Fathers of the Church had incidentally treated of many questions of social and economic justice in their writings. And in the Middle Ages the scholastics had systematically discussed questions of justice, such as contracts and prices, the duties of rulers, the nature of the state, etc. Moreover, in the medieval urban centers, Catholic laymen established those remarkable institutions, the craft guilds, with their variety of mechanisms designed to achieve justice in prices and wages, quality

products, and insure the religious and social welfare of the guild members and their families. But what did all this have to do with a world suffering the effects of the industrial revolution and subjugated to the exactions of capitalists?

Instinctively, as it were, as soon as Catholics began to turn their attention to the growing social problems of industrial Europe, at about the same time as Marx himself was writing, they looked to the medieval guilds for inspiration and guidance. These early efforts were soon ratified by the Holy See. For with Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, and even more with Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* of 1931, the medieval guild was taken from its historical place, reduced to its essential economic and social role, and presented to the modern world as the Occupational Group. Now it became a means for helping to solve the grave economic problems of the 1930s, and, more generally, by embodying the principle of economic self-government of both employer and employee, to overcome the disorganized state of economic life created by decades of capitalistic competition, yet without requiring central economic planning by the state. This adaptation of the medieval guild-principle is, I think, one of the most creative aspects of Catholic social teaching, and one that especially distinguishes it from contemporary secular attempts to deal with our socio-economic problems.

What became of this Catholic revival? Did it really suddenly die out in the middle of the present century? Though a few revival writers did live into the 1970s or 80s, unfortunately the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council put a stop to the revival as a movement. The Council itself endorsed much of the thought of the Catholic revival, and its documents should have been a spur to further work. But because of extrinsic circumstances, conclusions wrongly drawn from the Council's decree on religious liberty, and, apparently, the efforts of a few insiders who really did want to overthrow the imposing edifice of Catholicism, Vatican II, instead of crowning the work of the preceding century and a half, brought about its end. In time it may be that a new and correct appreciation of Vatican II will help the Catholic world to take up where it left off, using the real teachings of the Council to aid in elaborating Catholic thought and presenting it, with all its beauty, to the next century. The recently published *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is, I think, one step in this direction.

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Although I have said that for some time Catholics will probably take as their point of departure some insight reached during the Catholic revival, nevertheless, just as it was not sufficient for the writers of the revival to simply repeat what the Fathers and doctors had spoken during the formative centuries of Catholic thought, likewise it will not be sufficient for us to simply repeat what the great names of the 19th and early 20th centuries wrote. Though it is not yet possible to know with much certainty the character of the post-modernist age which we are just entering, still, if we are to effectively present the Gospel along with its intellectual implications to the world of the 21st century, we must do as our forebears did, a practice that our Lord himself commended:

Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. (Matt. 13:52)

Only if we ourselves encounter our tradition, both directly and through the mediating work of the Catholic revival, can we bring out of its immense treasure both the old and the new. And in the end they are the same, “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), made new for every age, a depth that can never be completely plumbed, always more full of riches than we can ever recover or appreciate.

NOTES

¹ Originally published in *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, vol. 95, no. 10, July 1995 as “The Catholic Intellectual Revival.”

² Several notable writers *had* converted to Catholicism in the 18th century – but their conversions did not “take.” They included Jean Jacques Rousseau, the historian Edward Gibbon, and James Boswell, the biographer of Samuel Johnson.

³ Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, no. 10.

⁴ One argument for finding a considerable continuity from antiquity through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance until the 18th century, and even into the first quarter of the 19th, may be found in C.S. Lewis, “De Descriptione Temporum” in *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge : Cambridge University, 1979), pp. 1-14.

⁵ *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame : University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁷ Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, no. 38. See nos. 35-39.