

Face-lifts and Feminists

Thomas Storck



Most people seem to like the lines between philosophical movements cleanly drawn, with evil always promoting evil and good always good. So if a movement or ideology—say Marxism—is erroneous and evil, these people are surprised that it ever has anything good to say, and might even deny that anything in Marx could possibly be true or right. But we should not be surprised at finding good mixed with error, because erroneous movements like Marxism commonly spring up in opposition to other erroneous movements—in this case industrial capitalism—and so necessarily grasp some truths, although mingled with much error. And the same can be said of feminism. Now I realize that “feminism” is a slippery word, a word which can mean many different things, and historically has meant different things. Speaking for myself, though, I think that the congeries of associations that linger about that word make it inadvisable for a Catholic to attempt to rehabilitate it. But that does not mean we cannot find truths among the feminists, as among the Marxists. Consider the following, from Susan Bordo, pro-abortion, feminist philosophy professor at Jesuit LeMoyne College:

Cosmetic surgery is a \$1.75 billion-a-year industry in the United States, with almost 1.5 million people a year undergoing surgery of some kind, from face-lifts to calf implants. . . . Lest it be imagined that most of these surgeries are to correct disfiguring accidents or birth defects, it should be noted that liposuction is the most frequently requested operation (average cost \$1,500) with breast enlargement (average cost \$2,000) a close second.

Are diverse ethnic and racial styles of beauty asserting their “differences” through surgery? Far from it . . . Cher is typical here; her various surgeries have gradually replaced a strong, decidedly (if indeterminately) “ethnic” look with a much more symmetrical, delicate Anglo-Saxon version of beauty. She also looks much younger at forty-six than she did at forty, as do most actresses of her generation, for whom face-lifts are virtually routine.

These actresses, whose images surround us on television and in videos and films, are changing

cultural expectations of what women “should” look like at forty-five and fifty. This is touted in the popular culture as a liberating development for older women; in the nineties, it is declared, fifty is still sexy.

But in fact Cher, Jane Fonda, and others have not made the aging female body sexually more acceptable. They have established a new norm—achievable only through continual cosmetic surgery—in which the surface of the female body ceases to age physically as the body grows chronologically older.

Can we see any connection between the insights Professor Bordo has stated and some words of Christ’s vicar, Leo XIII, in his encyclical *Arcanum* (February 10, 1880)? In speaking of divorce, Leo wrote that with it “the dignity of womanhood is lessened and brought low, and women run the risk of being deserted after having ministered to the pleasures of men.” In the nineteenth century, aging wives did not have the opportunity to seek facelifts and other such surgery, so, when divorce was legalized, they faced the possibility that their husbands would desert them for younger women. Today, not only wives trying to retain their husbands, but all women seeking men can resort to all the grotesque sorts of surgical treatments mentioned above. And, as professor Bordo points out, as “cultural expectations” of what a fifty-year-old woman should look like change, many men will demand that their wives look as young as Cher—or else. So women will submit to these degrading and maybe dangerous operations in order to minister “to the pleasures of men.”

Now, has Catholic thought ever paid attention to these kinds of operations? Under the charming topic of “mutilation”, moral theologians have indeed written about them. For example, plastic surgery is a form of mutilation. To undergo plastic surgery for unworthy motives, the late Pius XII stated, is not lawful; but where a justifying reason exists it is permissible. Doubtless a “justifying reason” could be found in remedying the effects of “disfiguring accidents or birth defects”: that, even Professor Bordo seems to countenance. But I cannot imagine Pius XII looking with favor on the process of making a woman look “much younger at forty-six than she did at forty...” or of enlarging her breasts.

So here we have agreement between Catholic thought and the insights of at least one feminist. And one might well

expect this, for Catholicism has never accepted the modern dualistic Cartesian vision of man, a vision that inspires much more of our culture than most people realize. Likewise, feminism, at least in part, is also reacting against this Cartesian vision, a notion of man that ignores most of the richness of his nature, reducing him to a logical machine somehow connected with a body (which is ultimately unimportant).



I am sure that there could be many fruitful reflections based on what I have written and quoted above. But what I want to take up is the question of why, given that Catholicism condemned and condemns both the male proclivity to cast off his wife as she gets older and the mutilations of the female as she hopes to avoid this, why it is that most Catholics have not developed a way of life, a vision of man, that integrally includes and combines such truths? Why is there not a well-known Catholic ethos that links these truths in a compelling and attractive way? Why is such an ethos not among those things that people think of first when they think of the Catholic Church? Why do feminists feel that they alone see the increasing practice of female mutilation as an evil? Nor can we simply say that it is the result of such truths not being preached from the pulpit. For among all the calls made for priests to teach God's law on abortion, contraception and divorce (calls that I fully support), I have never heard a call for preaching a total Catholic vision of life, a vision that sees the connection between abortion, contraception, divorce and the kind of evils Professor Bordo writes about, a vision that views all these practices in light of the Son of God taking human flesh and thereby sanctifying the human body. Why

do women feel that they have to embrace a feminism that supports abortion and often scorns men and marriage in order to discover for themselves that men and modern life exploit and disfigure women's bodies for their own pleasure? I daresay that Catholic women employ breast enlargement surgery as much as do non-Catholics, and it is a tragedy if it is only by accepting feminism or witchcraft or the worship of the goddess that they are being delivered from the temptations of trying to attract men by denying the real value of their bodies. Nor, as I said, is this a case of putting the blame on priests for not teaching this truth. For though it is a fact that sermons on mutilation are rare, where, among nearly all orthodox Catholics, is there a vision, a concept of man, that would cause any preacher to condemn this kind of surgery? Of course, they are buried deep in our moral theology books, and, if we really are orthodox, we will accept what the books say. But I am afraid that it does not seem sufficient to me to have these condemnations appear in isolated fashion among the diverse and nearly infinite list of the human race's sins. Is there not a Catholic way of looking at man which necessarily sees the evil of breast enlargement surgery, as well as contraception, abortion, divorce—and also includes everything from failure to acknowledge ourselves as creatures of Almighty God to not coveting our neighbor's goods? When every pseudo-religion and false philosophy of our day tries to put forth a total vision of man and of society, why are Catholics so slow to grasp the fact that we, too, have such a vision of man and of society, a vision as beautiful and profound as it is true?

But instead we tend to look at the Faith as consisting of so many separate dogmatic and moral truths, so many disparate exceptions to the bourgeois worldview we live by, exceptions to what Belloc called the "modern mind." Thus, while holding Catholic dogmas and moral teaching more or less firmly, most believing Catholics also accept a culture that is utterly antithetic to and destructive of the Catholic faith. This I think is the explanation for much of what happened during the 1950s. For a while it did not seem to be a problem, but eventually one of two things had to happen: either Catholics had to let go of modern culture and recover a true Catholic outlook, or what did happen, lose their own Faith. It is an impossible state of mind to be at peace with modern culture and yet firmly hold the Faith, for in this case the Faith is held as a series of propositions which are somehow exceptions to the subjective and man-centered culture in which one mentally lives.

Now culture means an entire way of life, starting with what we believe about religion, what kinds of literature we read, what kinds of music we make and listen to, how we educate our young, how our cities are laid out, what tools and utensils we employ, and what use we make of technology. Obviously large parts of one's cultural surroundings are indifferent as regards the Faith. The variety of traditional Christian cultures is witness to the fact that there are many differing ways in which the truths of Catholicism can be

incarnated in a way of life. But not all such cultural determinations are indifferent. Is it any accident, for example, that so much of what we associate with the modern world, its cult of power and efficiency, for example, first arose in the Protestant parts of Europe? While there may not be a peculiarly Catholic way to hold a fork or build a house, there is a Catholic way of looking at education, politics, economics and countless other subjects.

Most of us have little choice about the overall external or physical culture we must live within. Our Catholic brethren in Europe may be able to live amidst the public witnesses to the Faith of shrines and statues, the remains of a dead or dying Catholic culture, but in North America we must mostly do without even that. And though we can do a good deal to make our families and homes Catholic, we Americans, for example, cannot change the general secular/post-Protestant culture of our country. But what we can change is our internal culture, our mental culture. We can inhabit an intellectual and emotional world which is Catholic, and we can turn our small private spaces—like our homes—into oases of Catholic life. But one thing we cannot do very well, and in the long run not at all, is to have a non-Catholic mental culture and yet hold onto the Catholic faith. The general culture around us today, and indeed for many years, has been radically solipsistic and anti-sacral and if we accept its main tenets we have already lost the intellectual setting in which the Faith must rest. For example, if we believe, as do most moderns, that truth is ultimately a matter of opinion, then we obviously cannot consistently hold, as an exception to that, that the Catholic faith is absolutely and really true. Nor, if we hold the modern proposition that nothing is worse than physical or mental suffering, can we consistently accept that is always wrong directly to do a moral evil even to attain a great good. Nor, if we subconsciously think that the purpose of human society is to produce material goods as cheaply and quickly as possible, will we be able to make much sense of the Church's concept of a society in which we live in a fellowship that mirrors the fellowship of the Triune Godhead. If we hold the truths of the Faith as so many separate dicta, while the rest of our minds is filled with the errors of the modern mind, then this unstable condition cannot continue indefinitely.



It might seem to some that the opposition between the Catholic mind and the modern mind, between Catholic culture and modern culture, is not as deep as I have said. But I fear that the divide is even greater than this. As Christopher Dawson wrote, “. . . there is a fundamental disharmony between bourgeois and Christian civilization and between the mind of the bourgeois and the mind of Christ.” In other words, just as in a Catholic culture it is the Faith that forms and reforms every aspect of how men live, from the use of their tools to their music to their philosophy, so in our modern secular world it is this secularism which has formed every aspect of our civilization: our political and economic systems, our educational system, our entertainment media, our technology, the way we look upon our bodies. The Faith cannot be something like icing which is spread over an essentially antagonistic cake. If most people today were converted to the true Faith, then either we would immediately begin the arduous task of remaking our culture from the top down—and we could not omit things like the way we design our cities and what kinds of machines we use—or we would again soon suffer a gradual loss of that faith.

Unfortunately, as I said above, I do not think that even orthodox Catholics are exempt from the inroads of the modern mind. Many orthodox Catholics see little difficulty in identifying uncritically with American political conservatism. They do not seem to realize that the whole issue between liberals, moderates and conservatives has been framed in such a way as to entirely exclude real Catholic thinking. For example, on the subject of the economy, the issue is always presented to us as how much should the government regulate the economy or how much should the economy be left alone. Were a genuine Catholic idea to be proposed, such as regulation by intermediary groups, it would seem only bizarre. I do not think we will get very far by making isolated proposals about this and other current problems.

What can we do then? The only thing we can do, the only thing possible today, is to proclaim our entire vision of man and human society, a vision rooted in the Incarnation of the Lord, a vision strange to modern man, yet one that has never failed to attract whenever the Gospel has been preached. Moreover, not simply to proclaim that vision, but to try to live it, to realize it, to make it concrete. I am painfully aware of how far I am from doing this successfully. If we try to do it together, will we just fall short together? Doubtless we will, but that in itself, if we have gained any humility, will be simply a sign that our vision of human society, even society transformed by the Gospel, always looks past the earth toward the City which is to come, the City we wait and hope to attain, the City which comes down from God above.

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