

We need to challenge not only this culture's moral principles, but its intellectual principles as well.

To renew the Catholic mind

By Thomas Storck

■ When I was much younger and only recently a Christian, I read a book entitled *The Christian Mind*.¹ The author's thesis was that in today's world most Christians *thought* in a secular manner. Even if they professed belief in supernatural truths and principles, the actual springs of their actions were all this-worldly and secular, and did not flow from Christian thinking. The book made a sufficient impression on me that I have attempted afterwards to consider things from that standpoint. I believe the author is correct, and moreover, I think one can affirm not only the existence of a general Christian manner of thinking, but also of a Catholic way of thinking, a specifically Catholic cast of mind which enables its possessor to more easily think with the Church and thus more easily live as a Catholic. But unfortunately, for the most part we no longer have this mind. Most Catholics seem to think with a fundamentally secular mind, and sometimes this includes Catholics otherwise orthodox in faith. They too live in an atmosphere clouded with the unexamined assumptions of secular thinking. But if this is so, if the

Catholic mind has been lost, it can also be regained. And not only regained, in the sense of restored to what it was in some past year, but renewed.

To renew means, of course, to make new again. The Second Vatican Council called for a renewal of the Church, but since so much of that renewal has gone sour, the word itself has come under suspicion. It is thought to stand for so much of the error and nonsense that has been (wrongly) propagated in the name of the council, with the result that orthodox Catholics have sometimes turned to other terms, such as "to restore." Both terms actually express necessary truths and are not really opposed to one another. For if we restore things only to the way they were in 1960, then clearly we are again putting ourselves and the Church on the brink of disaster. On the other hand, if we restore things to their essential natures, then that is the same as making them new again, renewing them. So here I offer suggestions for renewing the Catholic mind, for calling it back to its original principles, principles which will allow us to enter upon

the third millennium with the confidence that befits the Church of Jesus Christ.

But first, what is the Catholic mind? What qualities does it have? They are, I think, four: 1) a supernatural sense; 2) a sacramental or Incarnational awareness; 3) a sense of tradition; and 4) a recognition of the whole or the sense of totality. I will discuss each of these qualities in turn.

A sense of the supernatural. The first characteristic of the Catholic mind, and its most important, is a sense of the supernatural. That is, a Catholic who thinks as a Catholic will recognize that the visible world around us, and our human life from birth to death, are only part of the totality of things. He will, for example, immediately and implicitly recognize the reality of things that cannot be seen, such as angels, and the warfare between the good and the bad angels. Most importantly, of course, he will recognize that after this life ultimately either eternal life or eternal death awaits each of us. Of course, this does not mean that one need belittle life in this world, simply that we must place it in proper perspective as only a part of the entire reality of things.

One chief way, it seems to me, that this supernatural sense is manifested in everyday life is in our judgments of the relative value of different kinds of suffering or different kinds of evils. There are those, for instance, who attempt to weigh in balance a deliberate abortion against some human suffering, including the life of the mother. A Catholic who has a supernatural sense realizes that, however much the art of medicine must try to save every mother's life, the moral evil of direct murder of a baby in the womb is in another order of things altogether. We cannot attempt to balance the two, for they are not comparable. We can never perform evil deeds in the moral order to avoid some ill in the order of nature. As Cardinal Newman said, it is

better for sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail, and for all the many millions on it

to die of starvation in extremest agony, as far as temporal affliction goes, than that one soul . . . should commit one single venial sin, should tell one wilful untruth, or should steal one poor farthing without excuse.²

Sin can never be justified as a convenience or an escape from a temporal evil. To do so proclaims that we have an attitude of considering this world with its sufferings and problems to be more real than the next world.

The same this-worldly thinking can be seen in those Catholics who justify deliberate killing of civilians during wartime, such as the bombing of Hiroshima, on the grounds that such action was necessary to save their country or to save the lives of their soldiers.³ They apparently fail to grasp the fact that such a sin can never be justified, no matter what temporal advantage might be gained or disadvantage avoided. The innocent can never be directly killed. The inconveniences or sufferings that result from embracing this principle can only be understood when viewed in a supernatural light—just as only God can provide the supernatural solace that can calm and heal the heart of man when confronted with such a dilemma.

Another example of a lack of a supernatural sense I noticed in a Catholic diocesan newspaper. The writer related how a relative had died peacefully in his sleep, and he called this a "happy death." Now the Church has always meant by the term *happy death*, that one died in a state of grace, in friendship with God. This of course is much more important than whether one dies painlessly during sleep or with the greatest physical agonies. But this writer had assumed the secular way of thinking, so that now the question of salvation or damnation is of less importance than whether one dies peacefully, as far as physical pain is concerned.

Our judgments about our everyday lives are also a good indication whether we are thinking with a supernatural sense or not.

Would we, if need be, rather be cheated than cheat others; are we willing to restrain ourselves, especially about money or sex, not from the fear of getting caught and going to jail or being embarrassed, but from fear of God, or better yet, from love of God? Do we lay up for ourselves treasures upon earth with anxious toil, but yet are lax about laying up for ourselves treasures in Heaven?

In Catholic education there is an ever present temptation to subordinate the eternal and supernatural aspects of education to the temporal. This can be done, for example, by making the goal of education the attainment of a job or entrance upon a career. It is done by those parents who choose Catholic schools chiefly because they are safer than the public schools or because standardized test scores are higher. There is nothing wrong with these reasons, but they cannot compare with the learning of Catholic doctrine and a Catholic outlook, which are the real reasons for Catholic schools. More subtly, it is done when facts bearing on the supernatural are ignored or downplayed. In studying history, for instance, a Catholic curriculum should not only give due weight to the actions of the Church and of individual Catholics throughout history, but more than this, give an interpretation of the course of historical events consonant with the Faith, as, for example, Chesterton does with the transition from the ancient pagan world to the Christian ages in *The Everlasting Man*.

An anxious desire to keep up with the world and all its standards likewise betrays the lack of a supernatural sense. Too often not just Catholic educators, but Catholic journalists, politicians, social workers, and other professionals, want nothing more than to imitate whatever the world currently honors. A concern with communicating Catholic truth, with morality—this is deemed too absurd even to bother to refute. Instead an atmosphere wholly secular is created.



As wickedness becomes more manifest in the world, the behavior of Catholics who are serious about preserving their faith will necessarily begin to seem more and more extreme. As the world becomes more evil we must become more and more countercultural. Things that nearly everyone takes for granted as ordinary parts of life, such as the books or movies or television shows popular in the world, since they are likely to weaken faith and undermine character, must be avoided, even though this might mark us as odd or even fanatical. Compromise with worldliness is a sign that one has lost the supernatural sense. We must realize that the judgment at the end of our lives is at least as real as the latest findings of psychology or of educational theory.

Now it is one thing to affirm and, after a fashion, believe these truths, but it is another thing to make them an integral part of our thinking and acting. They must become a second nature to us, principles first to guide our thinking, and as flowing from that, to guide our actions. Only then can we say that we

have the beginnings of that supernatural sense which is so necessary to preserve and enhance our faith.

Sacramental or Incarnational awareness. This characteristic of the Catholic mind is founded on the tremendous fact of our Lord's Incarnation, of the Word-Made-Flesh, the God-Man. Acknowledgment of the existence of God has been common throughout history. What is amazing about Catholicism, however, is our assertion that the almighty Creator of all things became a small child, a nursling at his Mother's breasts, a toddler playing, a teenager, a man. It was now possible to sup at table with the One who created the angels. The One who led Israel out of Egypt could now be seen over there taking a short nap or riding in a boat. This is the most incredible and outrageous claim that could be made. Yet because it is true and is the special mark of our Faith, as Catholics we must have this Incarnational sense.

The Church makes constant use of this Incarnational sense, especially in the sacraments and the sacramentals. Here ordinary matter, stuff, is, in different ways it is true, used to convey the supernatural. In the Eucharist the ordinary matter actually becomes the Divine. In the other sacraments and in the sacramentals, of course, nothing quite this stupendous happens. But it is still wonderful enough, as, for example, ordinary water becomes the means for conveying, in baptism, sanctifying grace, and as simple holy water, spiritual blessings of many kinds.

Now, how should this Incarnational sense affect our thinking and acting? I think that its primary effect will be on how we treat material things, but especially on our treatment of the human body. Right now, at least in the United States, we are in a curious situation. There is still a great deal of residual feeling that the body and sex—the means which God created for continuing the human race—are somehow dirty. Yet at the same time there is a

tremendous amount of abuse of the body and of sex. There is much unchastity, use of pornography and immodesty, both in real life and in films and magazines. But more grotesque than these are the practices of piercing the body, sticking safety pins and pieces of metal in the skin. At the bottom of this, I suspect, is a Manichean feeling that, since the body is worthless, it really does not matter what we do with it anyway. So people, as a result, feel they can abuse or mistreat the body, since it is only the "self" that is important. The fact that such an attitude could coexist with a materialism which denies the existence of the soul is certainly illogical. But then logic is not a strong point of the modern mind.

The sacramental sense is also connected with the Catholic sense of place and time. The mind of the 18th century, of the so-called Enlightenment, conceived of reason as a tool to discover universal and abstract laws on every subject. And hence whatever was not universal was intolerable. The metric system, for example, was devised during this time in France. This system takes one measure, the meter, and makes larger or smaller units simply by a kind of ruthless multiplication or division, without regard to how useful these units are for actual human use. Based on an abstract sense of order, it scorns the traditional or customary systems which existed all over the world, and ignores the fact that traditional systems had been worked out in connection with man's real needs—e.g., the inch, foot and yard were all derived from measurements of the human body and had been found useful in actual practice. The metric system is a monument to a universal and abstract mathematical idea. Similarly, in France after the Revolution, internal tariffs were eliminated and laws made uniform throughout the country. It was thought absurd that the sense of place should have any influence over such matters.

In contrast, the Catholic mind revels in the uniqueness of *places*. Our Lady has appeared

and asked for shrines to be erected in particular places, and in those places generally graces are available in greater profusion. The possibility of salvation, it is true, is present everywhere, but other graces, for example, physical healing, seem to be more readily granted only in some spots. Traditional Catholic kingdoms were usually a collection of local customs, rights and privileges, with no attempt to make them uniform throughout the realm. Such an arrangement, at the same time as it fostered true local feeling, by hindering the development of commerce, prevented that commercialization of all of life that is so characteristic of the modern secular world.⁴

A sense of tradition. In more than one way Catholicism is an historical religion. In its primary sense, of course, our faith depends on certain historical events, such as the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection. Secondly, Catholic theology has developed in history,

and often as a result of specific historical events, such as Arianism, which led to the Council of Nicea or the Protestant Revolt which led to Trent. The Faith has also been exemplified in history by the saints who, in a way, have lived out the Incarnation by showing that the holiness of the Church can be made actual, even in this world.

Now it may be theoretically possible for a "Bible-only" Christian to ignore history in the sense that for him, excepting the events of the New Testament period, Christianity is reinvented or rediscovered each time someone picks up a Bible for the first time. His interpretation of Holy Scripture is supposedly direct and unmediated. It does not depend on councils or Fathers or Doctors. It is his and can be made immediately and personally. But obviously this is not the case with a Catholic. And because of this, the formation of Catholics should include an initi-

**Would
you
like
to see
an end
to
angry
parent-
teacher
meetings?**

NEW CORINTHIANS, a five-lesson supplement to religious education, lays the groundwork for chastity through an understanding of the virtues needed for Christian discipleship. Following the recent Vatican document, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, the curriculum allows pastors to assist parents with education in human love without violating the principle of subsidiarity. Meets the concerns of both parents and educators without compromising Catholic doctrine.

Features

- Presents and supports Church teachings accurately
- Respects natural modesty—no classroom physiology
- Illustrates Christian virtues through the lives of the Saints
- Teacher's Manual is the Parent's Manual
- "At Home" exercises tie classroom to family environment
- Parents introduce human sexuality at their discretion
- *Parent-to-Child* booklet provides personal approach
- State-of-the-art pedagogy supporting orthodox doctrine

One book covers all nine grades! Handy coil binding for copying.

Only \$29.95 postpaid, includes separate booklet for Parent-Child instruction.

Call toll-free: 1-800-745-8252 (credit card orders only)

Or write:

FOUNDATION for the FAMILY

Box 111184 • Dept. A130
Cincinnati, Ohio 45211

Quantity
discounts
available

ation into the tradition which has been historically worked out under the Holy Spirit's guidance. But in how many Catholic schools is this done? In elementary schools are the students assigned saints' lives to read, or are they instead assigned contemporary juvenile works, works which more or less accept the bounds of reality which the contemporary culture has created? Does the teaching of history include the history of the Church and of the Catholic peoples, and thus attempt to acquaint Catholic young people with their own tradition and their own history? Or is it exclusively an affair of secular power struggles, trade routes and inventions?

And, of course, to what extent does the liturgy convey any sense of tradition today? Or does it, in too many cases, simply confirm people in their imprisonment in the late twentieth century? Yet the liturgy is the most effective and universal means of transmitting a sense of Catholic tradition on a wide scale. Until the real fruits of the Second Vatican Council begin to be realized in the liturgy, including the restoration of the Latin language, which the Council never intended to abolish, most Catholics will have a very impaired sense of the fullness of the Church's tradition, and thus, of the fullness of the Church's life.⁵

A sense of the totality. In his seminal essay, "The Function of the Catholic Graduate School,"⁶ Fr. George Bull, S.J. wrote,

Now, that totality of view is a mark distinctive of Catholic thinking, is something that even casual reflection on the Catholic mind will reveal. In that mind, could we but glance into it, we should find such things as these: that reality for the Catholic is not foreshortened, it is not circumscribed by the concrete.

And he goes on.

Reality has roweled his mind until it gallops freely into habits of comprehensiveness that embrace nature and man and God; whatever is or could be; what reason can establish and what God has revealed.

Although the Catholic mind understands the importance of the sense of place, it nevertheless sees each place as part of a whole. And while traditional patriotism was more attached to the locality than to any larger unit, the Catholic mind understood how each locality fit in, not only with the whole nation, but with all of Christendom itself. Thus, while moderns tend to be both parochial and at the same time rootless, a traditional Catholic civilization will produce exactly the opposite result, men who are aware of the worldwide dimensions of Christendom, yet are rooted in their own place. Thus the Middle Ages were in some ways extremely international, as in the use of Latin as a common tongue, but at the same time, very attached to the local valley or village or commune.

A sense of totality naturally is related to a sense of hierarchy, for in the relationships of many things, some must be higher and some subordinate. Again let me use education as an example. Any curriculum clearly must cover many different subjects. How, then, are they to be related to each other? Will there be some central principle which underlies the curriculum, and to which all the separate subjects must relate? In modern education there is no order and no overarching principle, that is, no concern with the whole. Subjects are represented in the university curriculum either out of habit, because they have been there a long time, or out of their utility for teaching students something "practical," that is, practical for getting a job. Each academic department jealously guards its own turf, and would never admit that its own subject might be in a natural subordination to another subject. Moreover, this lack of concern with the whole is no recent development, but has been around for at least a century. Philosophy is in one department, religion in another. Economics is conceived as an autonomous discipline, unconnected with morality and definitely not subject to theology or philosophy, despite the obvi-

ous fact that many ethical questions are intimately involved with it. Psychology has cut the ropes that bound it to philosophy, and now, cast loose, floats around looking for some anchor, finding instead flotsam and jetsam, which it eagerly picks up, soon discards, and begins to do all over again. Even where political science still pays some attention to political philosophy, it does not realize that a sound political philosophy depends on a sound philosophy of man, and ultimately on a sound metaphysics.

It is true that such subjects, as examples of natural knowledge, are governed by their own laws. But the Catholic mind recognizes the hierarchy of knowledge by which there cannot be a disagreement between what is known in theology or philosophy and what is known in another science. If economics or psychology purports to have discovered a truth that is contrary to the teaching of the Magisterium, for example, then this finding must be rejected, even if that entails rethinking many of the fundamental axioms of that subject, starting even with first principles.⁷

Our civilization is an empirical civilization and has been since it was reshaped in the 17th and 18th centuries by writers such as John Locke. If Catholics who dwell in it are to gain a sense of totality, they must consciously go outside this civilization for their intellectual nourishment. Which brings us to the main point—how are we to renew the Catholic mind?

To renew the Catholic mind. If Catholics for the most part no longer think as Catholics, what can we do about this? How can the Catholic mind be restored and renewed? Now the whole content of the Catholic mind was, in a sense, drawn out or deduced from the first principles of both revealed and natural knowledge by the Holy Spirit working in individual popes and saints, theologians and councils—in a sense, in the whole myriad of individual faithful who made up Christendom. But for

us to repeat this entire deduction would be as unnecessary as it would be doubtful. Instead, we have the delightful task of immersing ourselves in what these popes and saints and theologians said and did. In other words, we have the task of rediscovering for ourselves, appropriating for ourselves, the entire Catholic tradition.

Just as Catholics need to do spiritual reading, because our three enemies, the world, the flesh and the Devil, are real and we need a continual stimulus for interior conversion, we need to do something similar on an intellectual plane. To one extent or another, we are immersed in a culture whose principles are far more erroneous than we usually realize. We need to challenge not only this culture's moral principles, but its intellectual principles as well. And the only effective way we can do so is by reading—in fact, thoroughly steeping ourselves in the literature, and also the art and music, of our Catholic past, and of the sound Catholic present. Not everything from the past is good and, of course, by no means is everything from today bad. But most of us have a greater need of being instructed from the past, both because we cannot always judge whether something from the present is good or not, and because writers from the past are apt to remind us of truths that we have forgotten. As C. S. Lewis wrote in his essay, "On the Reading of Old Books":

Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes All contemporary writers share to some extent the contemporary outlook—even those, like myself, who seem most opposed to it. Nothing strikes me more when I read the controversies of past ages than the fact that both sides were usually assuming without question a good deal which we should now absolutely deny We may be sure that the characteristic blindness of the twentieth century—the blindness about which posterity will ask, "But how could they have thought that?"—lies where we have never suspected it, and concerns something about which

there is untroubled agreement between Hitler and President Roosevelt or between Mr. H. G. Wells and Karl Barth.⁸

Our task in reading the works of our Catholic forebears must be to attempt to acquire some Catholic sense, to shape in ourselves the Catholic mind. If we do so, if a sufficient number of Catholics take the Faith seriously enough so that they desire it to make and remake their entire lives—then, perhaps, we will witness a real renewal and restoration of the Catholic mind. That, together with a proper restoration and true renewal of the sacred liturgy, ought to bring about a revival of Catholic life throughout the world. Then—who knows—we may even, with our Lady's help, convert the world, and bring in another age of the Faith. ■

¹ Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*. This book has been reprinted by Servant Books.

² This statement is from Newman's *Lectures on Anglican Difficulties*, lecture VIII. It is quoted in Charles Kingsley's "A Reply to a Pamphlet," the attack on Newman that occasioned the great Apologian *pro Vita Sua*.

³ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no.

2314), quoting the Second Vatican Council, teaches that, "the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and man . . ." Yet fairly recently certain Catholics who pride themselves on their orthodoxy have attempted to justify such actions!

⁴ On the commercialization of modern life, see Ralph Lerner, "Commerce and Character: the Anglo-American as New-Model Man" in *Liberation South, Liberation North*, edited by Michael Novak (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, c. 1981), pp. 24-49. Although Lerner is generally supportive of this commercialization of life, he gives a good account of its progress.

⁵ See my, "Latin and the Recovery of the Catholic Mind," *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, vol. 96, no. 8, May 1996.

⁶ *Thought*, vol. 13, no. 50, September 1938. The passages quoted are on pages 365 and 366.

⁷ Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* (par. 41-42) teaches clearly that economics is intimately bound up with morality, and that although both economics and ethics "are guided each by its own principles in its own sphere, it is false that the two orders are so distinct and alien that the former in no way depends on the latter."

⁸ *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, c. 1970) p. 202. The essay was originally a preface to a translation of St. Athanasius's *The Incarnation of the Word of God*, published in 1944.



Mr. Thomas Storck is the author of *The Catholic Milieu* (Christendom College Press, 1987). His articles have appeared in *Faith & Reason*, *Social Justice Review*, *Fidelity and Faith*. Mr. Storck has an M.L.S. from Louisiana State University and an M.A. from St. John's College, Santa Fe, New Mexico. He is currently employed as a librarian in Washington, D.C. His last article in HPR appeared in the January 1997 issue.