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Small is Still Beautiful¹

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As the culture in the United States continues to deteriorate, Catholics are sometimes exhorted to be counter-cultural, by which is usually meant to resist society's blandishments with regard to divorce, contraception, abortion, lascivious entertainment and the like. And this is a kind of counter-cultural resistance that I myself heartily endorse. My only quibble about it is that it does not go far enough. For there is a whole other side of the modern world that is equally destructive of Christian life and that in fact has been as much responsible for the decay of our culture as the above-mentioned evils. This other attack is the assault of modern commercialism and technology. It is the attack of our dominant economic system, capitalism, and of its accompanying scientific and technological growth, which we like to call progress, although we have no idea toward what it is supposed to be progressing. In fact, it is like the growth of a cancer, which has no inherent end or final cause and whose enlargement will only result in the death of whatever it inhabits.

In the early twentieth century, many Catholic writers were aware that the problem of modernity was more than the problem of irreligion or unchastity. Perceptive thinkers such as G.K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Fr. Vincent McNabb, Christopher Dawson and many others also saw that the commercialization of life since the eighteenth century, and the concentration of things in ever bigger and bigger conglomerations, whether these were industrial, commercial or political, were equally threats to mankind's well-being. But today, at least in the United States, many Catholics see only half of the picture, half of the forces that have too often destroyed their families and neighborhoods and communities and even their own spiritual health. How they could fail to see this when television, one

of the most baneful of the forces arrayed against us, is fueled mostly by pursuit of the almighty dollar is hard to understand. But more of this later.

In 1973, E. F. Schumacher, economist and convert to Catholicism, wrote a book called *Small is Beautiful*. In this book he detailed the destructive effects of the modern world's relentless pursuit of bigness. The subtitle of his book, "Economics as if People Mattered," presents his thesis in a nutshell. Modern economists, indeed, the entire economic tradition since Adam Smith, including Marxist economists—seem to treat people, the human beings for whom Christ suffered and died—as so many statistics, so much raw material, as just another factor in the process of production. What effect economic policies actually have on families and communities, let alone souls, they hardly notice, so long as their macroeconomic statistics are rising—higher GDP, higher stock prices, higher and higher numbers of all kinds. As Schumacher wrote and as Pearce quotes, the gross national product "adds everything together, whether it is good or bad, healthy or unhealthy, life-sustaining or life-destroying" (54). Thus is the modern science of economics.

The second major foe Schumacher attacked was the cult of technology. It is a truism that machines should be man's servants and not his masters, but it is a truism that seems to be repeated without anything ever being done about it. Not only in the poor countries of the earth, where uncritical importation of the technology of the modern West has caused untold damage to traditional social fabrics, but even in our own country, modern technology is certainly one of the chief items helping to create the rootless and dying society of today's West. Schumacher's book received a great deal of attention in the 1970s, but over time it has tended to fade from view. Now, Joseph Pearce, known in this country as the author of *Literary Converts* and of biographies of Chesterton, Tolkien and Solzhenitsyn, has written a much-needed updating of Schumacher's book, another call to the right kind of action and a reminder that things have not gotten any better since 1973. Pearce's book is at least as hard-hitting as Schumacher's and we are equally in need of hearing his message.

Pearce's overall argument can be sketched as follows: Our current economic policies glorify growth without purpose or reason; it matters little what is produced, so long as it is marketable and measurable. But this attitude has helped to distort men's outlook so that instead of regarding greed as a sin (indeed, one of the seven deadly sins) greed or acquisitiveness has become a virtue, a virtue necessary to keep the economic engine running. Buy more or we will go into recession; keep buying; buy this and that; buy anything. These are the slogans of life today. Restraint, temperance as moderation in our possession and use of material goods—these are more than old-fashioned. They are unheard of. The newer, the bigger, the faster, the more expensive—everyday millions of dollars are spent trying to convince us to desire such things and then to open our wallets and take out our credit cards and buy them. "If we have food and clothing" said St. Paul, "with these we shall be content" (I Tim. 6:8). But the modern world does not want anyone to be content with anything—not his house, his car, his television, his watch, his aftershave. And it is a very short step from being discontented with all these to being equally discontented with one's wife or husband and equally ready to exchange her or him for a newer model. As Pearce writes, "The seven deadly sins of Christianity have become the seven deadly virtues of consumerism" (244).

This cult of materialism both relies on, and has helped to produce, a technology that is destructive and is a danger to our own health and the health of the world we live in. Though it may be fashionable in some circles to make fun of environmentalists, and though it is true that often those who seem most concerned about the health of our planet have become haters of the people for whom the planet primarily exists (they too see only part of the problem), concern for the environment is a very Catholic concern. Not only has the present Holy Father spoken of this on many occasions, but as far back as 1935 Christopher Dawson warned of our bourgeois civilization, divorced "from nature and from the life of the earth," concerned only with "objects of exchange, the value of which is to be measured exclusively in terms of money," and which results in the "destruction of the countryside and the pollution of the earth and the air and the waters."²

Pearce pursues his argument with vigor and passion. His assault on the cherished icons of the modern West is relentless. The first object of his criticism is the discipline of economics itself, as practiced by almost all economists today. Pearce's (and Schumacher's) charge is that this kind of economics fails to see that its purely quantitative procedures necessarily can judge only of quantity. But human beings are not purely quantitative creatures.

The fundamental error of modern economics is its mechanistic approach. It has evolved ever more intransigently in a merely quantitative direction, erecting econometric models based on mathematical theory which assume that the actions of people are essentially the same as the behaviour of atoms. (53)

Naturally, if one is looking only at quantity, quantity ultimately becomes the only measure of value. Thus, although economists today pretend that their science is "value free," what they term "positive economics"—as contrasted with "normative economics"—in fact, so-called positive economics is riddled with judgments about what should be valued. Free trade, for example, is recommended because it is supposed to result in cheaper goods, which is usually the economists' ultimate desideratum. Cheaper goods are thus preferred to all possible evils which can result from free trade, such as lost jobs, disrupted communities, failed businesses, dirty water or air, etc. These somehow escape from macro-economic equations, often because they cannot be quantified.

Such disguised ethical judgments that economists make are nicely summed up by Pearce in the phrase, "Get Rich, Be Happy" (56). But most thinking persons, not to mention those who claim to adhere to the Gospel, know that this is nothing but a lie. I have already quoted St. Paul's words about contentment with the material goods that we have. But if we continue the quotation, his words are even more damning of our modern way of life:

But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered

away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs.
(I Timothy 6:9-10)

The Gospel is very clear about the dangers of riches and materialism. Therefore in the past Catholics drew logical conclusions from the words of our Lord and his apostles. In particular, our medieval fathers in the faith worked out an entire moral code concerning wealth. Fr. Bede Jarrett summarizes it thus in his *Social Theories of the Middle Ages*:

Merely to engage in commerce for the purpose of making more money was not a sufficient justification, for money should be only a means to an end. To make it an end in itself was to spoil man's life, because life thenceforward became robbed of definite purpose.³

Pearce gets at the same truth when he asks,

At what point will people decide that they are rich enough to be happy . . . ? Indeed, what exactly is 'enough'? Conventional economics, obsessed with perpetual growth, has no concept of 'enough.' On the contrary, the key word in economics is not 'enough' but 'more.'" (57)

And lest it be thought that somehow the Church no longer believes this, consider these words of John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus*:

It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards "having" rather than "being," and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself. (#36)

Now what has all this led to? What have been the results of modern economic process? A few of them that Pearce cites are dying rural cultures, gigantic polluted cities (especially in poor countries), soil that has been depleted of its minerals and nutrients by constant use of chemical fertilizers, food robbed of its nutritive value—but economists, take note, it is very cheap! Disasters like

these have fueled the current environmental movement. But orthodox Catholics have by and large tended to stay away from that movement because most strains of it are generally anti-life and see the salvation of the world in rejecting Western civilization and all it is thought to stand for. But perhaps a couple of distinctions might help clear up our thinking a bit.

The first distinction is that between people and the way people live. Schumacher himself mentions this and is quoted by Pearce as saying:

. . . it is not the great numbers of the world's poor that are endangering Spaceship Earth but the relatively small numbers of the world's rich. The threat to the environment, and in particular to world resources and the biosphere, comes from the life-style of the rich societies and not from that of the poor. . . . A poor American may do much more ecological damage than a rich Asian. (236-237)

This can be seen by comparing some numbers. The per capita energy consumption in the United States went from 337 million Btu (British Thermal Units) in 1990 to 352 in 1996.⁴ The same figures for Brazil were 39 and 46, for Bangladesh, 2 and 3. If perhaps we would find it too hard to become content with the standard of living of those countries, consider that the figures for France were 156 and 169, for Ireland, 105 and 127.

In the United States, as average family size has declined, the average size of new houses built has increased. In 1970, the average size of a new single-family home was 1,500 square feet; by 1996 it had increased to 2,120 square feet. In 1970, the average family size was 3.58 people; in 1996 it was 3.20 people.⁵ Clearly the American way of life is wasteful, even in comparison with other rich countries.

Unfortunately it seems that some environmentalists would prefer to take the easy way out by trying to rid the world of poor people rather than trying to convince their rich fellow citizens to live less wastefully. Certainly the former is easier to do than the latter. But we ought to willingly embrace the kind of life that St. Paul is recommending, a life in which we are content with what we need. Perhaps if Catholics were well-known as being in the

forefront of a sane environmental movement, one that rejected abortion and contraception along with the needless luxuries and gadgets of the modern West, then we might be more able to attract some of the neo-pagan type of environmentalists to the truth.

Our second point concerns the question of the environmentalists' wide-spread disdain for Western civilization, and involves the distinction between the West as it is today and the West as the embodiment of Christian civilization, as Christendom. It will not take much argument to prove that the West as it is today is no longer Christendom. But we must ask which West it is that provokes the hatred of so many secular environmentalists. For when the modern West's attitudes toward money and technology are compared with those of historic Christendom, one can see that the haters of Western civilization are as confused about what it is they really hate as the defenders of the West are about what it is they really love, for there are some who think that to defend the Cartesian and secular culture of the last few centuries is somehow to defend the Christian and Aristotelian culture of the Middle Ages! For the scientific and technological revolution, supposedly the essence of the West, took off only when Aristotle was jettisoned. As Henry Veatch wrote at about the same time that Schumacher himself was writing:

For is it not a singular coincidence that in the confusion worse confounded of what we might call our contemporary youth culture, any number of young people today have begun to insist that they are "turned off" by the entire range of modern science and technology? Not only that, but they would not hesitate to throw out, along with science, the whole philosophical and cultural superstructure that has been erected over our increasingly frenzied and uncritical cults of science and technology as they have been developing over the last three hundred years. Now the irony is that the very rise of so-called modern science and modern philosophy was originally associated—certainly in the minds of men like Galileo and Descartes—with a determined repudiation of Aristotle: it was precisely his influence which it was thought necessary to destroy, root and branch, before what we now know as science and philosophy in the modern mode could get off the ground.

Accordingly, could it be that as so many of us today are turning our backs so bitterly on all the heretofore boasted achievements of modern culture, we might find ourselves inclined, perhaps even compelled, to return to the Aristotelianism that both antedated and was considered antithetical to the whole modern experiment in knowledge and in living?⁶

If we claim, then, to adhere to the classical and medieval Western tradition, as enshrined in what was once Christendom, we would do well to question many of the more recent products of the Western mind, products which by their wasteful and ruthless use of the natural world rightly provoke the scorn of many who are otherwise far from being sympathetic to Christianity. So before we condemn the admittedly confused environmental movement as being of the Devil root and branch, we should attempt to distinguish its good elements from its bad. We will find, I think, that in its opposition to runaway science and technology it is affirming truths that are closer to those of our forefathers in the Faith than are many of the facile arguments of some who claim to be defenders of Western tradition.

What we should strive for then, as Pearce says, is a way of life that can “work in harmony with natural processes” (163) rather than one that seeks “to defeat nature through the use of biological and chemical warfare” (154). Appropriate technology⁷ (championed and largely popularized by Schumacher), organic farming, consumption of local products as much as possible—these are some of the things necessary in the poor countries of Asia and Latin America but equally in North America and western Europe. If we put people and the way people live first, then the schemes for ever bigger and more impersonal political and economic structures, whether of the World Trade Organization or the European Union (both of which Pearce pillories), can be replaced by entities that respect man because they are built on a human scale. And because they respect man, they are more likely not to harm the earth on whose health man depends. And if all this seems too radical or too extreme, we should remember John Paul II’s words in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* that “the direct or indirect result of industrialization is, ever more frequently, the pollution of the environment, with serious consequences for the health of the population” (#34).

Pearce devotes several chapters to actual examples of healthy economic activity. One chapter deals with the largely successful revival of small breweries in England and elsewhere, and another with cooperatives, especially Equity Shoes of Leicester, England, a cooperative shoe company that has been in existence since 1887. These types of businesses recognize that there is much more to the economic process than higher stock prices or better balance sheets; there is a real craftsman's concern for a quality product, there is concern for a living wage and a working environment that is healthy both physically and psychologically, there is concern for the people and the soil and even the plants and animals in the area in which one's business is located. Economics is realistic only when it recognizes that there is much more than what is commonly considered economic.

Pearce, however, (and Schumacher) insist that, more than any structural reforms, what man needs above all is a different mindset. Before we can hope to put into practice any reforms in economics or politics or technology we must change how we think.

Science has given humanity knowledge but not the wisdom to use that knowledge prudently. Techno-man, devoid of any metaphysical understanding, knows *how* to do things without knowing *why* or *whether* they should be done. We do them because we can, not because we should. Indeed, we do many things we shouldn't merely because we can. (222-223)

Pearce goes on to say:

Why, one could be tempted to ask, should we concern ourselves with 'obscure' questions of philosophy when our world is in imminent danger? Why bother with nebulous metaphysics when what is needed is practical action and physical solutions to the world's problems? The answer is simple. There can be no solution to the world's problems until their causes are properly understood. The problems have been caused by a humanity that is in thrall to a view of itself and its environment which is essentially self-centred. If selfishness is a virtue, the ultimate reality, is it any wonder that the world has no other goal than unbridled economic growth so that the feeding frenzy of consumerism can be kept going? (229-230)

Thus, Pearce says, what are really needed are the cardinal virtues. As Schumacher wrote, "Yet, as the real cause of our troubles is *intemperantia*, how could we hope to bring pollution or population or the consumption of resources under control, if we cannot control ourselves. . . ?" (246). First and foremost, the struggle is a moral one. Our two fierce blocs, the right and the left, conservative and liberal, are both blind to an entire vision of reality, even as each grasps a few partial truths. Each side sees clearly its few truths and sees equally clearly its enemy's errors and untruths. And most people, following the pernicious maxim that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, join up with whichever group seems to have the largest part of the truth and thereafter damn everything that the other group stands for. Thus, because most of those who voice concern for worker's rights and the environment also favor the murder of the unborn, those who see the evil of abortion assume that worker's rights and the environment are not causes they need be concerned with. Add to all this a large dose of human hypocrisy (from the rich leftists who sip champagne and eat Brie while campaigning for impoverished farmworkers in Central America to the twice-divorced Newt Gingrich who supposedly sponsored a conservative revolution) and we have a recipe for endless fighting and little constructive action. But orthodox Catholics ought not to allow their enemies to define their beliefs or their causes for them. We ought to look to the traditional teachings of the Church and champion what is right and good regardless of who else turns out to be either an ally or a foe. Otherwise we are aiding and abetting a satanic project which has managed to divide the world into two warring groups, each largely blind to its own faults as well as to whatever virtues or truths the other group may have.

Although Pearce, who is a Catholic, has not written an explicitly Catholic book, *Small is Still Beautiful* contains numerous favorable references to the Catholic Church. Pearce quotes from or alludes to St. Thomas, Dante, nearly every pope since Leo XIII, Chesterton, Belloc and other Catholic writers. His laudable desire to reach a wide audience may explain his decision not to write more overtly as a Catholic. I believe, however, that in his effort to highlight the fact that all the traditional cultures of the world had similar attitudes of restraint toward the use of material

goods, Pearce at times goes too far. For example, he quotes approvingly Ananda Coomaraswamy,

If we leave out . . . the 'modernistic' and individual philosophies of today, and consider only the great tradition of the magnanimous philosophers, whose philosophy was a religion that had to be lived if it was to be understood, it will soon be found that the distinctions of culture in East and West . . . are comparable only to those of dialects; all are speaking what is essentially one and the same spiritual language, employing different words, but expressing the same ideas, and very often by means of identical idioms. Otherwise stated, there is a universally intelligible language, not only verbal but also visual, of the fundamental ideas on which the different civilizations have been founded. (237-238)

Whatever Pearce may understand by "all are speaking what is essentially one and the same spiritual language," I fear that what Coomaraswamy, a Buddhist, meant by it is something that a Catholic cannot accept. And though, for example, C. S. Lewis, in the appendix to *The Abolition of Man*, quoted from the scriptures of many different traditions to show that all mankind has had pretty much the same *morality*, this is not the same as saying that all men speak "essentially one and the same spiritual language." Today, when indifferentism and syncretism in religion is one of the chief intellectual dangers we face, I think there are better and safer ways of saying what Pearce probably intended to say.

Moreover, a Catholic must recognize that the reason man acts the way he does is ultimately the result of original sin. And we surely cannot hope to overcome the powerful force of man's appetite simply by traditional human wisdom, even when that wisdom is saying the right things. Only by means of the grace of Jesus Christ can mankind hope to turn his way of life around. If, as both Schumacher and Pearce aver, it is virtue that men above all need, where are we to find it except in the grace of Jesus Christ coming through the sacraments? There is only one font of grace in the world, even if God is not limited to the sacraments in his bestowal of that grace. We ourselves can have no expectation of finding it except in its proper channels.

Thus I recommend this book, as well as Schumacher's own still very relevant, *Small is Beautiful* or the lesser known, but perhaps even better book by Schumacher entitled *Good Work*. I recommend them especially for Catholics who do not understand how the Faith relates to the larger cultural questions of the last few hundred years, in particular to the very important questions of economics and technology. If we do not realize that these two areas of human life have important theological and philosophical bearings, we only half understand what the last few centuries have been all about. I say this even though reading *Small is Still Beautiful* can make one angry or cause one to nearly despair. For is it really likely that men will listen to Pearce, that the juggernauts of economism and anti-human technology will be tamed? But even if only one person begins to set his thinking and his soul in order through reading this book, or through reading Schumacher himself, then the world will be a more worthy offering to the Sacred Heart and the author will have vindicated his purpose.

Notes

¹ A review essay on *Small is Still Beautiful* by Joseph Pearce. (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 254 pp.

² "Catholicism and the Bourgeois Mind" in John J. Mulloy, ed., *Dynamics of World History* (La Salle, Ill. : Sherwood Sugden, 1978), 202-203.

³ Westminster, Md. : Newman Book Shop, 1942, 155.

⁴ All figures are from the 1998 *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Washington : Government Printing Office, 1998), table 1379.

⁵ 1997 *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, tables 66 and 1187.

⁶ *Aristotle, a Contemporary Appreciation* (Bloomington : Indiana University, 1974), 4.

⁷ Appropriate technology may be defined as a technology that is simple, decentralized, inexpensive and does the least damage to the environment and at the same time creates work, especially in rural areas - "not mass production but production by the masses . . ." (170).