

The “Eschatological Principle” in Catholic Social Thought

Mark Lowery
Professor of Theology
University of Dallas

The doctrine of the eschaton is not usually included among the array of Christian and Catholic social principles. In fact, it is often thought that attention to the last things hinders the commitment and quality of the Christian’s efforts in the temporal order. This article shows why the doctrine of the eschaton in fact has profound social ramifications. To wit: One’s eternal destiny is contingent upon the Christian’s fulfillment of his task in the temporal order, and because the Christian’s final hope is not worldly that task can be carried out regardless of the cost. The article also explores a related principle, the “proper autonomy of the temporal order,” and shows how both it and the “eschatological principle” are grounded in the Christian incarnational view of reality. Finally, the article shows how these principles shed light on the role of the laity in the temporal order.

Two Cities, Two Kingdoms

The Christian concept of history, found in Scripture and tradition, and heavily influenced by Saint Augustine’s understanding as put forth in his classic work *The City of God*, contains a startling counterintuitive element. We are citizens of the earthly, temporal order of history, but that history is not the most essential, or even the most real, aspect of humanity. There is another city or kingdom far more important: the kingdom of God or the city of God. Those who follow Christ are citizens of this city—and as *Lumen Gentium* carefully notes (nn. 14–16), non-Christians can participate in this city. Those who follow Christ are members of the church of Christ. Hence, members of the church have a dual citizenship—the city of God and the historical, political order. As

Gaudium et Spes (GS) notes: “This council exhorts Christians, as citizens of two cities, to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the Gospel spirit” (GS 43).

History is filled with sin, error, and tragedy, and it is the perennial temptation of mankind to seek a utopia in which all such unevenness disappears. Much of the Old Testament appears to presuppose such an understanding of history. In Genesis 12, God promises Abraham that his descendants will be vast in number, and that all the nations of the earth shall find blessing therein. The Israelite nation saw itself as the starting point for God’s redemption of history; eventually God would send the long-awaited Messiah to bring peace and justice to the earth. Many Jewish people were sorely disappointed when Jesus, claiming to be the Messiah, showed little interest in such an understanding of the kingdom of God.

Jesus established the kingdom of God in a very different form. This kingdom is made up of all believers and is properly called the church of Christ. Because all living members also exist on earth, this church exists in history, though is not *of* history. Citizens of the kingdom live within human history and can influence that history.

The Church has a saving and eschatological purpose which can be fully attained only in the future world. But she is already present in this world, and is composed of men, that is, members of the earthly city who have a call to form the family of God’s children during the present history of the human race, and to keep increasing it until the Lord returns.” (GS 40)

It is absolutely obligatory for the Christian to live within history and to bring the light of the gospel to bear on history: “Therefore let there be no opposition between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other.... The Christian who neglects his temporal duties ... jeopardizes his eternal salvation” (GS 43). The second-century *Letter to Diognetus* captures the essence of the two kingdoms in a remarkable way:

[Christians] do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life.... [A]t the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They live in their own cities, but only as aliens. They have share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land.... They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven.³

A Christian living virtuously—busy on earth—is going to have an effect on human history, and numerous Christians living virtuously will have a massive effect. The principles of Catholic social thought are guidelines as to how virtuous human beings ought to act *in history* in such a way as to improve the human condition in all its spheres, from the cultural to the political to the economic. Precisely because these principles properly turn our sight *toward* history, they are inherently susceptible to being misinterpreted and placed within the context of a “historicist immanentism” that makes history and historical progress an end in itself. To avert that danger, it is important to keep the doctrine about the eschaton—that God himself will be the one to one day bring about a “new heavens and a new earth”—in the forefront of Catholic social principles, infused into them as it were.

Counterintuitively, then, the doctrine of the eschaton has profound ramifications for Catholic social thought, so important that this article proposes a formal name for the principle: “the eschatological principle in Catholic social thought.” Here that principle appears in outline form. Because the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) instruction “On Christian Freedom and Liberation” (CFL) does a splendid job at mining the meaning of the eschaton for Catholic social thought, it is generously cited throughout.

The Eschatological Principle

The best way to improve society is to first realize that a utopia cannot be had. Right from the start, we find a powerfully counterintuitive point. Our hearts must be set on improving the temporal order, but lest we start off entirely on the wrong track, we must simultaneously have in our minds the awareness that perfection of the temporal order will not be ours to have. The beatitudes are perfect reminders of this fact: “They [the beatitudes] also divert us from an unrealistic and ruinous search for a perfect world” (CFL 62.5). Not only is it entirely unrealistic to hope for perfection, it is also ruinous—hence the next point.

Attempting utopia—usually state-mandated—is a sure way to make conditions even worse. The various brands of liberation theology—what I would call liberationism—look to one or another type of utopian scheme. For Marxists, it is the classless society in which everyone is content, greed and envy are absent, and hence all reason for conflict is gone.⁴ “At the core of marxism is a utopianism that suggests that creating a perfect world is not only a possibility but a moral imperative.”⁵ For radical feminists, it is a sexual egalitarianism that will pave the utopian way.⁶ For multiculturalists, it is a reli-

gious and philosophical egalitarianism that will make for perfect peace. As feminist author Regina M. Bechtle, S.C., put it, “At the beginning of every seemingly apodictic pronouncement ... stands the implicit qualification, ‘in my opinion’ or ‘from my perspective.’”⁷

Not surprisingly, these three forms of liberationism are often intermixed. Sadly, conditions end up severely worsened under utopian schemes, and those truly oppressed are betrayed.⁸

But it would be criminal to take the energies of popular piety and misdirect them toward a purely earthly plan of liberation, which would very soon be revealed as nothing more than an illusion and a cause of new forms of slavery. Those who in this way surrender to the ideologies of the world and to the alleged necessity of violence are no longer being faithful to hope, to hope’s boldness and courage, as they are extolled in the hymn to the God of mercy which the Virgin teaches us. (CFL 98)

The existence of human sinfulness is pervasive, and utopian schemes cannot ignore this phenomenon. Based in a purely materialistic worldview, many utopian schemes will be unable to admit the existence of sin. Yet, the pervasiveness of sin is precisely what makes progress toward utopia impossible. The very element that needs to be confronted is patently ignored. We cannot be blamed when we violate the moral law; we could not help it. In Christian forms of liberationism, this heresy eliminates God’s justice, focusing exclusively on his mercy.

J. Budziszewski notes that it is impossible to practice this consistently: “A sodomist and a bully both may be absolved because of predisposing factors ... but if the bully beats the sodomist, the sodomist is absolved but not the bully. A woman may be absolved of leaving her husband because she feels trapped in the marriage, but a man is not absolved of leaving his wife for the same reason because that would be sexist.” Also, “the critics of absolutionism are blamed for the sins of those whom they refuse to absolve.”⁹ (Someone recently noted she was a “recovering Catholic,” and blamed all sorts of disorder in her life on the Roman Catholic Church.) According to this error, sin and vice, and their opposite, virtue, are eliminated. If people’s lives are disordered, it is because of problematic social arrangements (often not enough money for a government-run program).

Only God can bring about a utopia, and this occurs eschatologically. This simple but profound point needs little elaboration. “... [U]ntil the risen One returns in glory, the mystery of iniquity is still at work in the world” (CFL 53). Because of sin, there will never be an earthly utopia, but rather that ultimate

fulfillment will be found on God’s terms. Here on earth, we find the seeds of the kingdom of God, which will find its completion eschatologically: “She [the Church] is the seed and the beginning of the kingdom of God here below, which will receive its completion at the end of time with the resurrection of the dead and the renewal of the whole of creation” (CFL 58).

The suprahistorical realm (transcendent realm) is itself accessible to us and allows the highest liberation, the “freedom of the sons of God,” or grace. Consider Zechariah’s canticle in the gospel of Luke. As one considers this text, it looks as if it is a meditation on temporal liberation. God has come to his people to “set them free,” to “save us from our enemies and from the hands of those who hate us.” However, then the prayer radically drives home the true meaning of liberation: the prophet from on high (John the Baptist) “will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation *by forgiveness of their sins*” (emphasis mine).

Mary’s *Magnificat* is a similar reminder. “The loving Virgin of the *Magnificat*, who enfolds the Church and humanity in her prayer, is the firm support of hope. For in her we contemplate the victory of divine love which no obstacle can hold back, and we discover to what sublime freedom God raises up the lowly” (CFL 100). As CFL notes, “The first and fundamental meaning of liberation which thus manifests itself is the salvific one: man is freed from the radical bondage of sin” (CFL 23).

Immediately, however, lest we focus on the individual person in pursuit of virtue with a heavenly end, we are reminded of the *temporal impact* of the liberation from sin: “The Church desires the good of man in all his dimensions, first of all as a member of the city of God, and then as a member of the earthly city” (CFL 63.3). Hence, our next point.

We can proleptically anticipate the eschaton. In following God’s will and living virtuously, we improve society. The freedom from sin, or growth in virtue, will have a powerful effect on human history. “The power of this liberation penetrates and profoundly transforms man *and his history in its present reality* and animates his eschatological yearning” (CFL 23, emphasis mine). There are human structures that get infiltrated by sinful human beings. Conversely, there are structures that get infiltrated by virtuous human beings. Probably all such structures are a mixture of virtue and sin—but at any rate, the more virtue predominates, the better society improves.

As CFL notes, the social teaching of the Church fits precisely here: “Liberation, in its primary meaning which is salvific, thus extends into a liberating task, an ethical requirement. Here is to be found the social doctrine of the Church, which illustrates Christian practice on the level of society” (CFL 99).

As Zechariah's canticle reminds us of the nature of true liberation, the *Magnificat*

tells us that it is by faith and in faith like that of Mary that the People of God express in words and translate into life the mysterious plan of salvation with its liberating effects upon individual and social existence. It is really in the light of faith that one comes to understand how salvation history is the history of liberation from evil in its most radical form and of the introduction of humanity into the true freedom of the children of God. (CFL 97)

Contrary to forms of liberation theology that posit an historicist immanentism that allows but one history, Roman Catholic doctrine posits a distinction between temporal and salvation history. These are distinct, not separate, and the distinction is precisely what allows that dynamism by which temporal improvement is to be wrought.

This hope [eternal happiness] does not weaken commitment to the progress of the earthly city, but rather gives it meaning and strength. It is of course important to make a careful distinction between earthly progress and the growth of the kingdom, which do not belong to the same order. Nonetheless, this distinction is not a separation; for man's vocation to eternal life does not suppress but confirms his task of using the energies and means which he has received from the creator for developing his temporal life. (CFL 60)

"It is thus by pursuing her own finality that the Church sheds the light of the Gospel on earthly realities" (CFL 65). Or, as *Gaudium et Spes* puts it: "the Church, in the very fulfillment of her own function stimulates and advances human and civic culture" (GS 58).

The preceding aspects of the eschatological principle free us in two ways—we are free from the temporal order and free for the temporal order. First, we are free *from* the temporal order. We are not preoccupied with discovering the perfect utopian scheme. Precisely because no earthly good is our highest good, we can appreciate earthly goods for what they have to offer, limited as they are.¹⁰ As one prayer has it: "[may I] be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy ... forever in the next." It is precisely when we are detached from created goods that they retain their true splendor; when we pursue them inordinately, we demand more of them than they we can bear—they become spoiled goods. Only a truly infinite good can fulfill us, and when a created good competes with and then even overtakes that position, it not only does not satiate, it makes us miserable. It becomes inordinate in a bizarre way: In a desperate attempt at fulfillment, we pursue it as if it were absolute and infinite,

but instead of satisfying us it makes us want the disordered good ever more—it spirals out of control in a helllike fashion. A proper alignment with the eschaton is the best antidote to this undue attachment to the temporal order.

Second, having been freed from the temporal order, we have nothing (of ultimate importance) to lose. As Justin Martyr put it in the second century: “But since we do not place our hopes on the present order, we are not troubled by being put to death, since we will have to die somehow in any case.”¹¹ This detachment, this freedom *from* the temporal order, allows a stunning and radical freedom *for* the temporal order. We can give no matter what the cost. The U.S. Catholic bishops’ document *Living the Gospel of Life* (n. 27) puts it perfectly:

[F]irst and foremost we need the courage and the honesty to speak the truth about human life, *no matter how high the cost* to ourselves. The great lie of our age is that we are powerless in the face of the compromises, structures and temptations of mass culture. But we are not powerless. We can make a difference. We belong to the Lord, in Him is our strength, and through His grace, we can change the world.

It is precisely this dynamic that allows Christians, with their sights on the eschaton, to give the most to the world. Rather than an opiate, the eschaton is a kind of stimulant. “Indeed, the mystery of the Christian faith furnishes [Christians] with an excellent stimulant and aid to fulfill this duty more courageously” (GS 57).

Saint Thomas More provides a stunning example of a full embrace of the eschatological principle, as noted by the U.S. Catholic bishops’ statement:

Catholics who are privileged to serve in public leadership positions have an obligation to place their faith at the heart of their public service, particularly on issues regarding the sanctity and dignity of human life. Thomas More, the former chancellor of England who preferred to give his life rather than betray his Catholic convictions, went to his execution with the words “I die the king’s good servant, but God’s first.” (n. 31)

The U.S. Catholic bishops apply this to our current setting:

In the United States in the late 1990s, elected officials safely keep their heads. But some will face a political penalty for living their public office in accord with their pro-life convictions. To those who choose this path, we assure them that their course is just, they save lives through their witness, and God and history will not forget them. (n. 31)

The text goes on to note that the risk of witness “should not be exaggerated” because many voters are hungry for substance in their candidates. Still, a risk there is—and with it, given the eschatological principle, the freedom to take that risk. Citizens likewise take risks when they prudently take bold steps to stand up for principles, when such action can cause alienation from friends, family, coworkers, and acquaintances.

Not only do Catholic citizens have a ground upon which to risk anything and everything, the church throws herself into the temporal order without counting the cost. Her Christian social principles, and her very laity, are her gift to the temporal order. Precisely because of her eschatological focus she is able to give with abandon. It goes without saying that the personnel of the church often fail in living out this ideal.

The Autonomy of the Temporal Order

There is another principle in Catholic social thought that might be called the flip side of the eschatological principle—the principle that the temporal order has its own proper autonomy. The word *autonomy* here is distinct from two other common usages: Autonomy can be a reference to the great good of free will, and it can refer to the evil of making ourselves arbiters over the moral law. As a principle of Catholic social thought, however, it denotes that the created order is intelligible in its own right—it has been created in an ordered way by God’s wise plan (through the Logos), and our minds are commensurate with that order. According to *Gaudium et Spes*, “for though the same God is Savior and Creator, Lord of human history as well as salvation history, in the divine arrangement itself, the rightful autonomy of the creature, and particular of man is not withdrawn, but is rather reestablished in its own dignity and strengthened in it” (n. 41). Further, “If by the autonomy of earthly affairs we mean that created things and societies themselves enjoy their own laws and values . . . then it is entirely right to demand that autonomy” (n. 36).

Sometimes Christians are under the impression that bringing the gospel into society means Christianizing various aspects of it, that is, making various facets of temporal, secular society such that they have an explicitly Christian veneer. Christians also might be under the impression that they ought only participate in those cultural activities that are explicitly Christian. Such misimpressions betray a flawed understanding of the proper autonomy of the temporal order. Various aspects of society need not necessarily have anything explicitly Christian about them—be it entertainment, business, education, and

the like. These aspects of society have their own proper autonomy, their own inherent laws, which can be perfectly compatible with Christian values. Of course, when incompatibility appears, it is the duty of Christians and people of good will to correct the disorder. Consider some examples.

1. A Christian businessman might think that an optimal operation ought to contain explicitly Christian products. While there is nothing at all wrong with marketing Christian products, one can be a fine businessman without so doing.
2. Another businessman might think it essential to announce his commitment to Christian principles in his advertising. I enjoy the comment in the catalog of one of my own favorite businesses, that the whole business is run based on the lordship of Jesus Christ. But, such a comment does not *in itself* make it a business of higher quality than others or a business that is more Christian than others.
3. A committed Christian family might think they ought only participate in forms of entertainment explicitly Christian. Again, while there is nothing at all the matter with explicitly Christian movies, plays, or songs, entertainment can be perfectly acceptable without an explicit Christian dimension, so long as it is not incompatible with Christianity.
4. Christian schools and home-schooling families, understandably reacting to the blatant secularism of many educational materials used in the public system, sometimes think that every subject area must have a biblical/Christian dimension. While there is nothing wrong with using biblical materials in spelling and math, those areas have their own proper autonomy and a well-conceived secular method is licit to use.
5. The autonomy of the temporal order illumines the perennially discussed relationship between Christianity and the political order. For Roman Catholics, that autonomy in part grounds the doctrinal development culminating in Vatican II’s *Decree on Religious Liberty (Dignitatis Humanae)*. The state need not confess the Catholic faith, for the political realm has its own proper autonomy. A properly construed constitutional democracy—a truly *personalist* democracy—is compatible with Roman Catholic doctrine, as genuine freedom is granted to the practice of religion. In evangelical circles, the question of a Christian America is similarly illuminated. Without trying to create (or restore) a Christian United States, Christians can still be

Mark Lowery

actively engaged in the political order—such a perspective is of great help in threading through the recent controversy over Cal Thomas’ and Ed Dobson’s book *Blinded By Might*.¹²

The autonomy of the temporal order helps distinguish the terms *secularism* and *secularization* (or *secularity*). Secularism refers to the denial of a transcendent dimension, and as such is repudiated by Christianity. Secularity, on the other hand, is identical to the notion of the autonomy of the temporal order and is a great good. Secularization would refer to the historical process by which man discovered (with the aid of revelation) the autonomy of the temporal order. The Jewish religion, with its doctrine of creation, is perhaps the most central aspect of that historical process. Christianity used the concept of logos to illumine the ordered nature of God’s creative plan. Christian authors, such as John the Evangelist, combined the notion of wisdom from Jewish texts such as Proverbs 8 and Sirach 24, with the Greek concept of logos, to illumine the nature of God’s ordered plan. It is precisely the doctrine of creation, and the commensurability of the human intellect with the created order, that allows the possibility of metaphysics and a doctrine of natural law. Saint Thomas spoke of the natural law as our rational participation in the eternal law; and the eternal law is none other than the ratio of God’s intelligence under the aspect of its providential ordering of and care for the whole universe.

As an aside, the idea of the autonomy of the temporal order may mark the heart of the divide between the West and an Islamism that can brook no distinction, much less separation, of religion and state.¹³ At the same time, one reason why traditionally Islamic cultures can gradually embrace liberal political arrangements is our common Judaic heritage: The autonomy of the temporal order finds its greatest historical impetus in the Hebrew distinction between a transcendent God who creates and the forces of nature that are inherently intelligible (Genesis 1–2).

Connected to the rightful autonomy of the temporal order is the “rightful autonomy of the participation of lay Catholics”¹⁴ in the political sphere and all other spheres of public life. As they exercise their own expertise, they themselves are to make prudential judgments about the infusion of truth into the temporal order.

The Incarnation as the Ground of the Two Principles

The two spheres of reality—the divine and the human, the transcendent and the immanent—are the two poles, as it were, that come into play respectively in the eschatological principle and in the principle of the proper autonomy of the temporal order. Remi Brague, in his masterful book *Eccentric Culture*,¹⁵ notes that Christianity synthesizes the two spheres in an extraordinary way. His thesis is stated here in capsule form: “Christianity unites the divine and the human just where it is easy to distinguish them; it distinguishes the divine and the human where it is easy to unite them. It reunites what is difficult to think of together, and it separates what is difficult to think of as separate” (p. 155). In discussing the “two symmetrical temptations” (p. 156), Brague first sketches the ease with which religions and cultures separate the divine and the human—the prime mover of Aristotle, the gods of Epicurus, any systems of thought that keep God as “absolutely other.” Here, Christianity unites. Reciprocally, he sketches the ease with which the two are united. The king is also the priest, or the father of the family is the priest of the home altar. Sexuality and political existence are divinized. Here, Christianity distinguishes.

Christianity refuses both symmetrical temptations. From its Jewish heritage came a freedom from a divinized temporal order—secularization (not secularism). Particularly, “the religious membership of the people of Israel ceased to coincide with the political membership in a state” (p. 158). Christianity has resisted the temptation to absorb the political into the religious, or the religious into the political (p. 159). Brague contrasts this accomplishment with both Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam. In Christianity, “the profane domain and its order received ... a space at the interior of which they could develop according to their proper laws” (p. 162).

Lest that distinction also becomes a separation, Christianity also unites the spheres, and it is the doctrine of the Incarnation that accomplishes this.

The habitual oppositions between the divine and the human are then no longer valid. God is capable of “descending” from heaven to earth, of entering in time and leading a temporal life here; he can know suffering and death. The Christians even go so far as to say that God reveals himself nowhere else more divine than in this abasement. From this point on, man is no longer hovered over by God. He is rather subverted by Him: God is no longer “over” but “under” him.” (p. 163)

Brague goes on to apply his understanding of the Incarnation to European civilization, showing how the possibility of a secular society is thus made possible (p. 165). “If the Father gave everything in the Son, he has nothing more to give us.... One sees the paradox: the withdrawal of the sacred comes from its refusal to remain in its inaccessible transcendence” (pp. 166–67).

Precisely because of the particular (the Incarnation) Christianity can be truly universal. There is no sacred language or sacred culture; rather, Christianity can penetrate anywhere and everywhere, without destroying the legitimate structures wherein it enters, be they cultural, economic, linguistic, and so on. At the same time—and here I supplement Brague’s analysis—no aspect of culture is immune from human sinfulness, and it is precisely here that Christianity performs its stellar work of announcing the good news to sinful humanity. Sin does not destroy the inherent goodness of creation—we might say that sin leaves intact the rightful autonomy of the temporal order.¹⁶ Rather, sin takes various goods of humanity, goods that have their own rightful autonomy, and skews these goods by disordering them. Sin spoils these goods by disallowing their proper order—hence, sin is called “privation”—the privation of a due good. For instance, the great good of scientific inquiry, with its own proper autonomy, is skewed when scientific knowledge is used in a way contrary to the dignity of the human person (genocide or euthanasia, for example).

Although the human person, saved by the redeeming love of Christ, is essentially good, the concupiscent tendency remains as a residual effect or wound of original sin. We might best define *concupiscence* as the tendency to pursue the goods of creation out of due order. On our own power, we are incapable of mastering the powerful concupiscent tendency, and it is precisely here that Christianity infuses a supernatural power into creation, still in a way that respects the proper autonomy of the created order. This *particular* power of Christianity strengthens its *universality* for at least two reasons: nowhere does that power disallow the rightful structure and autonomy of the created order, and no place or structure on earth is inherently incapable of receiving this supernatural gift, be it explicitly or implicitly.

If I may add still another point to Brague’s fine analysis: He shows so well how the autonomy of the temporal order results from an incarnational view of reality. It is true that God has “given everything” in the Incarnation, but it is also true that the Incarnation points to the eschaton and grounds what this article calls the eschatological principle. So, the Incarnation lets the world be the world in not one but two ways: It allows the temporal order its proper autonomy, and it reminds us that the temporal order is not its own end, an end in

itself. From the Incarnation springs both the principle of the autonomy of the temporal order and the eschatological principle.

The Dynamism for Christian Action in History

Those two principles, at first blush, can give the wrong impression that Christianity is separate from various aspects of temporal society. After all, the eschatological principle emphasizes the final goal of history, while the autonomy of the temporal order seems to leave Christianity to the side. It is precisely these two flip side principles that, taken together, create a kind of dynamism by which the Christian acts effectively in history. (When presenting this idea to an audience, I like to use an analogy. As a child I enjoyed a simple game called “Roll-Up.” It consists of two parallel metal rods, about a foot long each, attached at one end to a flat wooden frame. A rather heavy metal ball, an inch in diameter, rests between the rods. The object is to open up the rods, which allows the ball to drop unless you carefully squeeze the rods together just right to make the ball roll forward, indeed to move upward. Only with the two rods operating in tandem does the ball go into action, and if one or the other rods is not properly engaged, failure ensues.)

Forged in these two principles, the Church offers a genuine anthropological expertise, an *expertise in humanity*, to the human family living within the vagaries of the temporal order. She is not an expert in business, science, engineering, education, or any other temporal affair. She is an expert in what it means to be a human person and is capable of discerning that which is out of alignment with man’s nature. Hence, she has no particular temporal mission, yet at the same time is concerned with all temporal affairs. As *Gaudium et Spes* put it,

Christ ... gave His Church no proper mission in the political, economic or social order. The purpose which he set before her is a religious one (footnote references Pius XII: “Christ ... has not given it any mandate or fixed any end of the cultural order.... The Church can never lose sight of the strictly religious, supernatural goal. The meaning of all its activities ... can only cooperate directly or indirectly in this goal”). But out of this religious mission itself comes a function, a light and an energy which can serve to structure and consolidate the human community according to divine law (n. 42).

In essence, Christianity is not to be understood as a *means* to some other good, such as a more just social order. Christianity is an end in itself—put otherwise, the call to “put on Christ” through the sacraments is an end in itself. An

effect of people pursuing this end is a more just social order, and if a great many people of a nation pursue this end, their society will be a supremely just place in which to live. Due to concupiscence, this rarely occurs.

C. S. Lewis articulates this very point in one of his famous letters from Screwtape—a master devil writing letters of instruction to an apprentice devil trying to lure a convert away from the “enemy” (Christ). In letter VII, Screwtape discusses whether the convert should be pushed toward Patriotism or Pacifism during the war. The final comment in the letter is a splendid example of the eschatological principle at work:

Which ever he adopts, your main task will be the same. Let him begin by treating the Patriotism or the Pacifism as part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part. Then quietly and gradually nurse him on to the stage at which the religion becomes merely part of the “Cause,” in which Christianity is valued chiefly because of the excellent arguments it can produce in favor of the British war effort or pacifism. The attitude which you want to guard against is that in which temporal affairs are treated primarily as material for obedience. Once you have made the World [secular history] an end, and faith a means, you have almost won your man, and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing. Provided that meetings, pamphlets, policies, movements, causes, and crusades, matter more to him than prayers and sacraments and charity, he is ours—and the more “religious” (on those terms), the more securely ours.

Lewis’ most famous book contains this very point in its title. Christianity is not a means to some other end, such that we would speak about Christianity and self-esteem or Christianity and a more just social order: Rather, it is an end in itself—mere Christianity.

The Role of the Laity

Integrally connected to the dynamism of our twin concepts is the distinction between clergy and laity. That distinction is not merely a matter of delegating responsibilities in a utilitarian sort of way. Rather, the clergy/laity distinction is forged from these principles, and is the embodiment of the principles.

The main role of the Church, as seen in the analysis thus far, is not to fight social injustice, nor is it to help people feel a sense of self-esteem or any other such worldly goal. It is to lead individuals to virtue and sanctity and thereby to sanctify the world. It is for this reason that the Church may never be involved

in partisan politics and that her leaders may never take public office. (To do so would be to politicize the faith, treating it as a means to some temporal end rather than as an end in itself.) Rather, the clergy exist first and foremost to invite individuals to live a sacramental life leading to sanctity.

Those individuals, then—the laity—have the job of living out their new life in Christ within secular history, respecting the proper autonomy of the temporal order. They are to bring the truths of Christ to bear on society, rendering each element of the temporal order compatible with the natural law and the gospel. *Lumen Gentium* (n. 31) spells this out clearly:

What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature. It is true that those in holy orders can at times be engaged in secular activities, and even have a secular profession. But they are, by reason of their particular vocation, expressly and professedly ordained to the sacred ministry. Similarly, by their state in life, religions give splendid and striking testimony that the world can not be transformed and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes. But the laity, by their special vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God.

The role of the laity is not specifically to do liturgical and church-oriented affairs. True, for those who have time, help is needed in every parish with the liturgy, with various committees, and a full variety of activities. These important activities are in the service of priestly ministry, and hence I coin the term *ministerial assistance* for these important activities, and the term *ministerial assistant* for the layperson who engages in this work professionally. These activities, however, are not constitutive of the layperson’s role in the Church.

When the role of the laity is misplaced and too connected to the cultic life of the Church, it easily becomes devalued. Members of the laity in Chicago voiced this very concern in a public letter in 1977, and now more than twenty-five years later the analysis remains poignant:

It is our experience that a wholesome and significant movement within the Church—the involvement of lay people in many Church ministries—has led to a devaluation of the unique ministry of lay men and women. The tendency has been to see lay ministry as involvement in some church related activity, e.g., religious education, pastoral care for the sick and elderly, or readers in church on Sunday.¹⁷

Mark Lowery

Ironically, while the laity became more involved in church-related affairs, the clergy began to see as their own duty that which was traditionally the laity's. As the Chicago letter goes on to note,

During the last decade especially, many priests have acted as if the primary responsibility in the Church for uprooting injustice, ending wars and defending human rights rested with them as ordained ministers. As a result they bypassed the laity to pursue social causes on their own rather than enabling lay Christians to shoulder their own responsibility. These priests and religious have sought to impose their own agendas for the world upon the laity. Indeed, if in the past the Church has suffered from a tendency of clericalism on the right, it may now face the threat of a revived clericalism—on the left.

Rather than imposing on the laity—and on the world—any particular political agenda, it is the duty of the clergy to tirelessly preach the gospel, inviting all to become ever more vital members of the church of Christ, the kingdom of God here on earth. The truths of the faith and the truths of the moral life must be preached and taught. Among the truths of the moral life are found certain social principles—the body of Catholic social thought. It is the duty of the laity to live *as Christians* in the social sphere, and bring the principles of social thought to bear on social life.

As the Chicago letter goes on to say:

As various secular ideologies, including communism, socialism and liberalism, each in turn, fail to live up to their promise to transform radically the human condition, some Christians seek to convert religion and the Gospel itself into another political ideology. Although we also yearn for a new heaven and a new earth, we insist that the Gospel of Jesus Christ by itself reveals no political or economic program to bring this about. Direct appeals to the Gospel in order to justify specific solutions to social problems, whether domestic or international, are really a betrayal of the Gospel. The Good News calling for peace, justice and freedom needs to be mediated through the prism of lay experience, political wisdom, and a technical expertise. Christian social thought is a sophisticated body of social wisdom which attempts such a mediation, supplying a middle ground between the Gospel on the one hand and the concrete decisions which Christians make on their own responsibility in their everyday life.

Conclusion

Obviously many are tempted today to try to give the Church a more explicitly political or economic mission. For it is most tempting to think that the human condition cannot just be improved but can be made ideal—a utopia. The eschatological principle rescues us from that ruinous illusion. Hence, the supreme irony: The best way to improve the social order is first to realize that it cannot be perfected by human design. Once that conviction is nurtured (particularly by the clergy and their ministerial assistants) and imbibed, the laity have the proper freedom whereby they can delve into their activity in the temporal order, guided by the principles of Catholic social thought.

Notes

1. Also see *GS* 76: “For man’s horizons are not limited only to the temporal order; while living in the context of human history, he preserves intact his eternal vocation” (translations from *Gaudium et Spes* are from the Daughters of St. Paul edition.)
2. Also see *GS* 38: “Christ is now at work in the hearts of men through the energy of his Holy Spirit, arousing not only a desire for the age to come, but *by that very fact* animating, purifying and strengthening those noble longings too by which the human family makes its life more human and strives to render the whole earth submissive to this goal” (emphasis mine).
3. Cyril C. Richardson, ed. and trans., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 216–17.
4. For a direct application of various types of Marxism to the quest for a utopia, see the aptly titled book by Rael Jean Isaac and Erich Isaac, *The Coercive Utopians* (Chicago: Regnery, 1985); see esp. pp. 33–41 on the embrace of Marxism by churches, and p. 284 on Joseph Schumpeter’s thought.
5. Jennifer Roback Morse, *Love and Economics* (Dallas: Spence, 2001), 226. Morse goes on to note: Advocates of limited government, on the other hand, realize that perfection is not an option and try to make the best of imperfect situations. Libertarians recognize that any institutions they establish or laws they pass will be imperfect.” (Note that Morse advocates an economic libertarianism but argues that an accompanying moral libertarianism is disastrous.)
6. See the recent document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*. “The obscuring of the difference or duality of the sexes has enormous consequences on a variety of levels” (art. 2).

7. "Feminist approaches to Theology I," *The Way* 27 (1987): 129. Luckily, such a qualification then also applies to Sr. Bechtle's own thesis against "patriarchal religion" outlined in her article.
8. In the novel *Magic Seeds* by V. S. Naipaul (New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), the main character is trying to find purpose in life and becomes a guerilla fighter to help the poor in India, only to find out that the liberationists are exploiting the poor just as much as the "British imperialists." He ends the novel saying: "It is wrong to have an ideal view of the world. That's where the mischief starts" (p. 280). Also see p. 161.
9. J. Budziszewski, "The Problem with Liberalism," *First Things* 61 (March 1996): 20–26.
10. Jennifer Roback Morse applies this principle to marital difficulties: "[I]sn't it sometimes a variant of utopianism that leads people to throw away perfectly good marriages to perfectly decent human beings in the hope that some other person of life will finally bring perfect happiness? ... How much happier might we be if we worked with the imperfect people on hand rather than continually switching around, looking for perfection?" (*Love and Economics*, p. 228.)
11. "First Apology," in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. and trans. Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 247. Consider the following episode in the life of Saint Basil. He was pressured in 371 to sign the Arian Creed of Rimini, and refused. When pressured by Prefect Modestus, who tried to frighten him with various torments, he replied:

Well, in truth confiscation means nothing to a man who has nothing, unless you covet these wretched rags, and a few books: this is all I possess. As to exile, that means nothing to me, for I am attached to no particular place. That wherein I live is not mine, and I shall feel at home in any place to which I am sent. Or rather, I regard the whole earth as belonging to God, and I consider myself as a stranger or sojourner wherever I may be. As for torture, how will you apply this? I have not a body capable of bearing it, unless you are thinking of the first blow that you give me, for that will be the only one in your power. As for death, this will be a benefit to me, for it will take me the sooner to the God for Whom I live, for Whom I act, and for Whom I am more than half dead, and Whom I have desired long since.

Quoted in Warren Carroll, *The Building of Christendom* (Front Royal: Christendom College Press, 1987), 55–56.
12. Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999). For a good discussion, see various pieces from *World* magazine at worldmag.com (search: blinded by might). As Joel Belz summarized, Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson "criticized evangelical Americans for supposing they could install a godly agenda by means of the ballot box and political action. Almost immediately, James Dobson

of Focus on the Family weighed in with a feisty response, taking Mr. Thomas and the other Mr. Dobson to task for throwing in the towel in the battle for public-policy supremacy” (<http://worldmag.com/displayarticle.cfm?id=3430>).

13. See Alain Besançon, “What Kind of Religion Is Islam?” *Commentary* (May 2004): 42–48, at 47: “In Islam, by contrast, the will of God extends, as it were, to the secondary causes as well as to the primary ones, suffusing all of life. Religious and moral obligation can thus take on an intensity and all-encompassing sweep that, at least in Christian terms, would be regarded as trespassing any reasonable limit.”
14. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Participation of Catholics in Political Life*,” art. 6.
15. Remi Brague, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization*, trans. Samuel Lester (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002).
16. Here are the specific Church documents in which the phrase has appeared in the thirty-five years since Pope Paul introduced it: It appeared in 1967 in *Populorum Progressio* and in 1987 in Pope John Paul II’s *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* in connection with cultural development; in 1978 in “Religious and Human Promotion” by the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes and in 1979 in Pope John Paul II’s opening address at the Puebla Conference of Latin American Bishops in connection with human rights; in 1987 in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s document “Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and the Dignity of Procreation” with obvious connection; in 1990 in Pope John Paul II’s *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in connection with education; in 1991 in the Pontifical Council for the Family’s “In the Service of Life” in connection with life and education; in 1993 in Pope John Paul II’s *Veritatis Splendor* in connection with examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel (shades of *GS*); in 1994 in the Congregation for the Clergy’s “Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests” in connection with the job of priests (more shades of *GS*); in 1996 in the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*’s “World Hunger, A Challenge for All: Development in Solidarity” with obvious connection; in 1997 in the Pontifical Council for Health Workers’ “Care for the Sick and the Fathers of the Church” with obvious connection; in 1998 in Pope John Paul II’s “Message for World Migration Day” with obvious connection; and in the same year in his arrival speech on his pastoral visit to Cuba in connection with the Church helping young people to develop ethically and to develop a relationship with God. In unofficial documents—the news media—in 1998 Cardinal Pio Laghi mentioned the Church’s expertise in humanity in relation to education; also in 1998 Cardinal Stafford mentioned it in relation to the elderly. (Research by Louise Mitchell, University of Dallas, 1999.)
17. “Declaration for Concern: On Devaluing the Laity,” *Origins* 7, no. 28 (December 29, 1977).