

Centesimus Annus and the Renewal of Culture*

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“The individual today is often suffocated between the two poles represented by the state and the marketplace. At times it seems that he exists only as a producer and consumer of goods or as an object of state administration.”¹ In these words from *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II presents the fundamental problem of which I propose to speak in this brief essay.

Western society in the present century has been fluctuating between the two extremes mentioned by the Holy Father. In the United States we seem to be caught between the seductions of the welfare state and libertarian capitalism. The one, consistently pursued, leads to the “animal farm” of state socialism; the other, to the anarchic jungle of social Darwinism.

To transcend the dilemma, it is necessary to recognize that politicization and commercialization are not the only alternatives. In a recent speech, Mary Ann Glendon pointed to the necessity of getting beyond the market/state dichotomy. “There’s a growing recognition,” she said, “that human beings do not flourish if the conditions under which we work and raise our families are entirely subject either to the play of market forces or to the will of distant bureaucrats. The search is on for practical alternatives to hardhearted laissez-faire on the one hand and ham-fisted top-down regulation on the other.”²

The first step in this search, I suggest, is to acknowledge that in addition to the political and the economic orders there is a third, more fundamental than either. The moral-cultural system is, as Michael Novak has insisted, the pre-supposition of both the political and the economic systems.³ It can be neglected only at grave risk to the soundness of the society as a whole. In fact, as Novak says in another place, “the central debate of our time has switched increasingly from politics and economics to culture.”⁴

Culture almost defies definition because it is a pervasive atmosphere rather than an articulated system. It is a social force that encompasses individuals and welds them into communities. It shapes their prejudices, ideas, values, habits, attitudes, tastes, and priorities. The Second Vatican Council in its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* dealt with culture, economics, and politics in three successive chapters, giving a certain priority (at least of order) to culture over the other two. Ever since the Council, Karol Wojtyla, before and after his election as pope, has consistently emphasized the indispensable importance of culture. In many of his writings, including *Centesimus Annus*, he points out that culture is more comprehensive than either economics or politics because it deals with the deepest questions of life. Whereas politics and economics are concerned with proximate and limited goods, culture has to do with the meaning of human existence as a whole. It inquires into what we are as human beings, and what reality is in its most comprehensive dimensions. Touching as it does on the transcendent, culture cannot evade mystery, including the deepest mystery of all, which we call by the name of God. "At the heart of every culture," we read in *Centesimus Annus*, "lies the attitude that a person takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God."⁵

Culture, therefore, is inseparable from religion. John Paul II would probably agree with Paul Tillich, who wrote: "... religion is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion.... [R]eligion cannot express itself even in a meaningful silence without culture, from which it takes all forms of meaningful expression. And we must restate that culture loses its depth and inexhaustibility without the ultimacy of the ultimate."⁶

It is possible, of course, for culture to neglect the question of God and to confine its horizons to the temporal and the visible. But in so doing it trivializes itself or erects false idols by absolutizing something that is less than ultimate. These superficial and distorted forms of culture cannot be unmasked or corrected except by higher and sounder forms of culture. To neglect the formation of culture is therefore irresponsible.

Under National Socialism and Leninist communism, efforts were made to abolish religion as an independent force and to redefine the human in exclusively this-worldly categories, particularly in economic and political terms. These two opposed systems were alike in subjugating the economic, the political, and the cultural orders to the power of the totalitarian state. Both of these experiments were economic and political failures. However, their most foundational failure was cultural in nature. By introducing a spiritual void into existence at its center these systems, as *Centesimus Annus* puts it, threw the human heart into turmoil.⁷ And in so doing they sowed the seeds of their own destruction.

The giant evil of National Socialism, with its ghastly record of violence and oppression, was overthrown by the Second World War. Marxist communism, after attempting to dominate the Eastern half of Europe by brute force, collapsed of its own weight in 1989. But what will take the place of these systems? Will Europe rediscover its spiritual and religious roots, or will it fall into new forms of materialism and practical atheism? The present scene is not encouraging. Paraphrasing the thought of John Paul II, George Weigel puts the following questions:

Can the new democracies develop societies that provide for the free exercise of human creativity in the workplace, in politics, and in the many fields of culture without becoming libertine in their public moral life? Will “consumerism”—that is, consumption as an ideology—replace Marxism-Leninism as the new form of bondage east of the Elbe River? Has it already done so in the West? If not, how can we prevent its triumph? If so, how can we repair the damage and put the free society on a firmer moral foundation?⁸

These questions call attention to the vital importance of moral and cultural foundations for a satisfactory political or economic system.

In the United States we have had a relatively successful system of democratic capitalism supported by a culture that gave a strong moral and religious tone to the fabric of society as a whole. Michael Novak, in a series of excellent books, has taught us the intimate connection between democratic government, a capitalist economy, and a religiously defined culture. “Democratic capitalism,” he writes, “is not a ‘free enterprise system’ alone. It cannot thrive apart from the moral culture that nourishes the virtues and values on which its existence depends.”⁹ Elsewhere he points out that the allurements of the free society, cut loose from the guidance of morality and religious faith, are leading to serious behavioral dysfunctions, such as drugs, crime, divorce, abortions, teenage pregnancy, and the like. The widespread loss of moral virtue in American society, he says, creates larger and larger numbers of uncivic-minded hedonists on the one hand, and clients wanting to be supported by society on the other. “When enough citizens can no longer govern their own passions and feelings, it is chimerical to imagine that they can maintain a self-governing republic.”¹⁰

In his speeches and letters of recent decades, Pope John Paul II has made many of the same points. In *Centesimus Annus*, he comments on the dangers of consumerism, which ensnares people in a web of false and superficial gratifications rather than helping them to experience their personhood in an authentic way.¹¹ In later paragraphs, he speaks of the necessity of recognizing transcendent truth in order to give a solid rationale for the rights of the human

person and to guard against a resurgence of totalitarianism.¹² Human rights cannot be inviolable unless they are objectively founded in God as their source.

In other writings the pope asserts that the West has been suffering a decline of cultural influence because of a severe crisis of truth. This is at root a metaphysical crisis. "An objective vision of the truth," he writes, "is often replaced by a more or less spontaneous subjective view. Objective morality gives way to individual ethics, where each one seems to set himself up as the norm and to wish only that he be required to be true to that norm."¹³ Elsewhere the Holy Father calls attention to the rise of an "anti-culture" that manifests itself in "growing violence, murderous confrontations, and the exploitation of instincts and selfish interests."¹⁴

The principal message of *Centesimus Annus*, as I read it, bears not on politics and economics in themselves but rather on culture as the sustainer of both. John Paul II calls, above all, for a restoration of the order of culture, with its transcendent horizons and its disinterested concern for the true, the beautiful, and the good.¹⁵ Only when we have citizens who are concerned with these transcendent values can we overcome the tendency to put profits ahead of people and self-indulgence ahead of responsible service. A lived relationship to the transcendent can foster the self-control, the spirit of service and sacrifice, that are requisite for a workable free society and a corresponding free-market economy. Without these cultural attitudes there can be no culture of peace, no civilization of love.¹⁶

To recover the lost cultural ground will be no easy matter. Authors such as Michael Novak and George Weigel rightly emphasize the symptoms of moral decline. The pope himself speaks in similar terms, but he is careful, as they also are, not to reduce culture to morality. Morality itself requires a larger vision to sustain it. It cannot survive as a mere set of commands and prohibitions.

Culture, I repeat, is oriented toward the true, the beautiful, and the good. Because it has its seat in the human heart and mind, it can never be fully institutionalized. It does, nevertheless, have institutional expressions without which it could not be successfully fostered or transmitted. The truth is served by institutions of education, learning, and research; the beautiful is promoted by museums, literature, and the arts, as well as by parks, gardens, and the like. The good, to the extent that it can be institutionalized, is fostered by churches and religious groups. Religion and morality have always been close allies.

The institutions of culture, such as churches, schools, publishing houses, and theaters, can scarcely sustain themselves in our society without support from, and dependence upon, either the state or the private sector of the economy. Either form of patronage has its risks. The government, when it gains

control, tends to exclude religion and morality in order to escape involving itself in matters in which it has no competence. It would be unconstitutional for the United States government to give direct support to any religious institution. When government subsidizes education, research, and the arts, therefore, it tends to bypass questions of ultimate truth and value, which are precisely the questions most needing attention. Religiously oriented projects are at a constant disadvantage in the competition for public assistance.

Support from the private sector, which seems to be the only viable alternative to government funding, carries risks of its own. When businesses sponsor cultural activity, they are inclined to transform it into a type of entertainment, with a view to seeking profits. Instead of elevating the human spirit, the popular culture of the media tends to debase the spirit by exploiting the insistent human appetites for pleasure and excitement. Education, art, music, and drama are deformed when used in the service of advertising or converted into business enterprises. Even religion can become big business, as is evident in the case of televangelism. Driven by commercial interests, the dominant culture reinforces the bane of consumerism rather than providing the needed corrective. To some degree, private charitable donations and foundations make up for this deficiency. Our churches, universities, museums, and other cultural institutions are generously supported by wealthy benefactors, but not to the degree that is required to reorient our culture as a whole.

It should never be forgotten that the true, the beautiful, and the good, the transcendentals that serve to define the goals of culture, are not fully separable from one another. In God these three transcendentals coincide, and in the world they rise and fall together. If religion fosters moral and spiritual excellence, it is because it contains truth. The highest truth, indeed, is conveyed by revealed religion, the religion of the absolute good that God alone is. The truth of God, shining forth in the glories of nature and of grace, is also the supreme beauty—that beauty, ever ancient and ever new, which Saint Augustine so passionately loved and celebrated in the immortal words of his *Confessions*. The Platonists of old had perceptively defined beauty as the splendor of truth (*splendor veri*).¹⁷ The Letter to the Hebrews depicted the eternal Son as the radiance of the Father's glory (cf., Heb. 1:3). That same radiance, reflected in the human countenance of Jesus and in the saints who witnessed to him, inspired the great art and architecture, music and poetry of the ages of faith.

These examples from the past would seem to confirm the validity of John Paul II's contention in *Centesimus Annus* that the Church can make a specific and decisive contribution to authentic culture.¹⁸ As the “pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), the Church can teach the meaning of human existence

in the light of God's revelation. She alone administers the covenanted means of grace and salvation apart from which human beings cannot rise to their true stature. A culture without a basis in revealed religion would be incapable of meeting the real needs of individuals and societies in our time or, in fact, in any time. God's word in Jesus Christ, however, can elicit the generosity, the self-sacrifice, the patience, and the hope that are needed to build a society of peace, a civilization of love.

In these summary comments I have tried to express my appreciation for two theses that I regard as central to *Centesimus Annus*: first, that both politics and economics have their matrix in culture, and second, that culture is incomplete without religion. The political and the economic orders cannot prosper without support from the order of culture, which provides the convictions and values on which the state and the economy are predicated. The world of culture, moreover, touches closely on that of religion. If it attempts to suppress the dimension of ultimate mystery, it impoverishes itself. It has everything to gain if it opens its doors to God and to Christ.

Religion, for its part, need not retreat into narrow pietism, dogmatism, or moralism. It effectively fosters the good by promoting intellectual and artistic achievement, thus identifying itself with the true and the beautiful. The Church becomes more attractive, more credible, and more influential to the extent that it embraces the vast world of culture, accepting, purifying, and elevating the finest fruits of human creativity. Even on earth the Church is called to resemble the heavenly Jerusalem, described in Holy Scripture as a beautiful bride, bright as a jewel, gleaming with the splendor of God (cf., Rev. 21:2, 10–11).

Notes

* Speech delivered to a conference on the encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, sponsored by the Acton Institute, Washington, D.C., May 13–14, 1996.

¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (May 15, 1991), no. 49.

² Mary Ann Glendon, "Beyond the Simple Market-State Dichotomy," *Origins* 26 (May 9, 1996): 797.

³ Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 185.

⁴ Michael Novak, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 214.

⁵ *Centesimus Annus*, no. 24.

⁶ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 248–49.

⁷ *Centesimus Annus*, no. 24.

⁸ George Weigel, *Soul of the World: Notes on the Future of Public Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 141.

⁹ Novak, *Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, 56.

¹⁰ Novak, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 197.

¹¹ *Centesimus Annus*, no. 41.

¹² *Ibid.*, nos. 44, 46.

¹³ John Paul II, "Speech to Intellectuals and Scientists, Coimbra, Portugal," *Origins* 12 (May 27, 1982): 29.

¹⁴ John Paul II, "Address to the Pontifical Council for Culture," January 16, 1994, in *The Church and Culture Since Vatican II: The Experience of North and South America*, ed. Joseph Gremillion (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 209.

¹⁵ *Centesimus Annus*, no. 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 51.

¹⁷ See Jacques Maritain, *Art et Scolastique*, 4th ed. (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1965), 42.

¹⁸ *Centesimus Annus*, no. 51.