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Ethos, Person and Spirit – Principles of Cultural and Social Renewal

In section §16 of *Redemptor Hominis*, Progress or threat?, John Paul II achieves a remarkable sense of perspective by bringing into play the specific heritage of papal social encyclicals and pronouncements from the time of world war II and projecting them forward in time for the twenty years that lie before him on the threshold of the new millennium. He also takes into view both the depth of the human spirit and the eschatological demands of the gospel. The important section begins with a fruitful explanation of the office of Christ's kingship:

Section 16, paragraph 1: If therefore our time, the time of our generation, the time that is approaching the end of the second millennium of the Christian era, shows itself a time of great progress, it is also seen as a time of threat in many forms for man. The Church must speak of this threat to all people of good will and must always carry on a dialogue with them about it. Man's situation in the modern world seems indeed to be far removed from the objective demands of the moral order, from the requirements of justice, and even more of social love. We are dealing here only with that which found expression in the Creator's first message to man at the moment in which he was giving him the earth, to "subdue" it. [Gen 1:28; Vatican Council II: Decree on the Social Communications Media *Inter Mirifica* §6: *Gaudium et Spes* §§ 74, 78] This first message was confirmed by Christ the Lord in the mystery of the Redemption. This is expressed by the Second Vatican Council in these beautiful chapters of its teaching that concern man's "kingship," that

is to say his call to share in the kingly function--the *munus regale*--of Christ himself. [*Lumen Gentium* §§10, 36] The essential meaning of this “kingship” and “dominion” of man over the visible world, which the Creator himself gave man for his task, consists in the priority of ethics over technology, in the primacy of the person over things, and in the superiority of spirit over matter.

In the twenty years leading up to the new millennium, John Paul II anticipates continual progress but warns of the many forms of threat that loom over mankind; for the situation today is “far removed from the objective demands of the moral order, from the requirements of justice, and even more of social love.” The objective demands of the moral order are known to us through natural law and confirmed through the revealed law of God in the Ten Commandments. The requirements of justice are known through political and social philosophy and centuries of institutional and jurisprudential development. The question of social love, the quality most lacking in the world, is by no means a new reality, for Augustine discussed the importance of solidarity and social love: human communities are defined and constituted by the common objects of love. John Paul II gives social love a new attention because in the modern world people are brought into closer contact and various ethnic groups and social classes are brought into greater inter dependence and relationship. John Paul II looks to the order of creation to gather basic principles for social order since the earth is given to all mankind in Adam. He cites the little known document of Vatican II on social communications to explain precisely the notion that a major feature of the modern world is the greater contact between people: “These technical advances have the purpose of bringing men into closer contact with one another.” (§6) In this document the Council Fathers connect Gen. 1:26-28 to this advance in the improvement of human conditions – “The Christian vision of man, of his motives and of his history sees in this development a response - though usually an unconscious one - to the divine command to ‘possess and master the world.’” This mandate from God demands the human cooperation in the divine work. John Paul II’s early encyclical on the meaning of

human work arises out of this Christian vision of man. This in turn leads him back to a consideration of *Gaudium et spes* (§§74, 78) and its very important sections on the good of the political order and the foundation of international peace. As social and political by nature, human beings must live in political association, and this takes the form of a nation state, but also open to international cooperation.¹ International peace must flow from justice but even more from social love:

This peace on earth cannot be obtained unless personal well-being is safeguarded and men freely and trustingly share with one another the riches of their inner spirits and their talents. A firm determination to respect other men and peoples and their dignity, as well as the studied practice of brotherhood are absolutely necessary for the establishment of peace. Hence peace is likewise the fruit of love, which goes beyond what justice can provide. That earthly peace which arises from love of neighbor symbolizes and results from the peace of Christ which radiates from God the Father. §78

Indeed, John Paul II looks to that factor which transcends politics and human justice, namely culture as a function of religion, as he meditates on the *Redeemer of Man*. He considers the teaching of “man’s kingship” or the *munus regale* of Christ himself. In *Lumen gentium* the

¹ Men, families and the various groups which make up the civil community are aware that they cannot achieve a truly human life by their own unaided efforts. They see the need for a wider community, within which each one makes his specific contribution every day toward an ever broader realization of the common good. For this purpose they set up a political community according to various forms. The political community exists, consequently, for the sake of the common good, in which it finds its full justification and significance, and the source of its inherent legitimacy. Indeed, the common good embraces the sum of those conditions of the social life whereby men, families and associations more adequately and readily may attain their own perfection. ...[authority] must always be exercised within the limits of the moral order and directed toward the common good--with a dynamic concept of that good--according to the juridical order legitimately established or due to be established. When authority is so exercised, citizens are bound in conscience to obey. ...According to the character of different peoples and their historic development, the political community can, however, adopt a variety of concrete solutions in its structures and the organization of public authority. For the benefit of the whole human family, these solutions must always contribute to the formation of a type of man who will be cultivated, peace loving and well-disposed towards all his fellow men. §74

three fold office of Christ of priest, prophet and king is richly developed. John Paul II references section 10 on the priestly office of Christ — lay faithful share in the priestly sacrifice of praise to God the Father through their “witness of a holy life, abnegation and active charity.” In other words, social and political activity should most of all shine forth in a witness to the goodness of God. In section 36 of *Lumen Gentium* the kingly office of Christ is fulfilled by the lay faithful by their own interior ordering of virtue and also by ordering the whole of creation to the praise of God. How is this achieved? “By their secular activity they help one another achieve greater holiness of life, so that the world may be filled with the spirit of Christ and may the more effectively attain its destiny in justice, in love, and peace.”² The most important temporal activity is the building up of a culture conducive to the flourishing of human beings and for the honor of the creator: “they will impregnate culture and human works with a moral value. In this way the field of the world is better prepared for the seed of the divine word and the doors of the Church are opened more widely through which the message of peace may enter the world.” It is only light of the issue of culture that we can make sense of the summary statement of principles drawn by John Paul II to apply to the present situation. These are as follows: (i) the priority of ethics over technology, (ii) the primacy of the person over things, and (iii) the superiority of spirit over matter.

The three principles are interconnected and they together lay out a program for cultural development. In other words, this is not a check-

² Therefore, by their competence in secular disciplines and by their activity, interiorly raised up by grace, let them work earnestly in order that created goods through human labor, technical skill and civil culture may serve the utility of all men according to the plan of the creator and the light of his word. May these goods be more suitably distributed among all men and in their own way may they be conducive to universal progress in human and Christian liberty. Thus, through the members of the Church, will Christ increasingly illuminate the whole of human society with his saving light. Moreover, by uniting their forces, let the laity so remedy the institutions and conditions of the world when the latter are an inducement to sin, that these may be conformed to the norms of justice, favoring rather than hindering the practice of virtue.

list but interlocking dynamic principles for culture. The principle, for example, concerning the priority of ethics over technology must be understood in a more profound way than the application of moral norms to technological projects. Modern morality, especially the Kantian variety, may interpret it in such a way. But John Paul II is a Thomistic philosophy; ethics is about a way of life, an ethos, a development of character within a community. The whole modern project comes forth from the notion that technology can substitute for morality or ethics. It emphasizes *techne* and human art above ethos or character. Technology is more a way of life than a set of tools and instruments. John Paul II study of *humanae vitae* would reflect this very issue. Artificial birth control is precisely the substitution of technological solutions for what is primarily a moral or ethical issue. Responsible parenthood demands mutual self-giving, self-control, and generous readiness to receive children. Artificial birth control places the burden of responsible parenthood on method effectiveness and external devices. The priority of ethics over technology is intrinsically connected with the priority of the person over things. Technology can degrade the world to the status of a thing to be used, including the human person. And the priority of the spiritual over the material is perhaps the fundamental underlying principle of cultural development. This will be clear in the following paragraph. But generally we can say that modern culture emphasizes the material over the spiritual. The Marxist/Communist ideology is explicitly and dogmatically materialistic, denying all spirituality and goods beyond the temporal. The liberal ideology of the west emphasizes productivity of material goods and emphasizes the comfortable self-preservation of the individual. God is left out of the picture entirely.

Culture plays a strategic and critical role in the thought of John Paul II. George Weigel insists that the great lesson that John Paul II derived from Vatican II and applied throughout his world journeys is “the priority of culture.”³ In his famous address to UNESCO he said

³ *Witness to Hope*, pp. 792, 801-803, 847.

“I am the son of a Nation which has lived the greatest experiences of history, which its neighbors have condemned to death several times, but which has survived and remained itself. It has kept its identity ... not by relying on the resources of physical power, but solely by relying on its culture.” He defended the importance of culture in philosophical articles⁴ and his pastoral work as Bishop. As a philosopher he argued against the Marxists that culture emerges out the metaphysical depth of the human person. Culture is not so much creation of products as it is the creation of the human self, radiates out into the world of products. He said culture is a “connatural reality in relation to human being.” It is more than production and consumption. It is about the very development of the person. John Paul II will say that culture is “of man, from man, and for man.” The ultimate beneficiary must be each human person, the primary objective of culture is “the development of man as man.” Understood in this way he said “culture embraces the totality of the life of a people: a set of values which animates it and which, being shared by all of its citizens, unites them in one personal and collective conscience. Culture also embraces the forms through which these values are expressed and depicted, in other words, the customs, the language, art, literature, institutions and structures of the society as a whole.”⁵ In his commentary, *Sources of Renewal*, he said: “It can be seen how deeply the attitude of Christian responsibility has plunged its roots into culture and tends constantly to raise it to a higher level.”⁶ In all of these accounts he references the central work of Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, especially §53ff. We would do well to have before us the definition and description of culture found therein:

⁴ “The Problem Of The Constitution Of Culture Through Praxis” in *Person and Community*, chap. 17, pp. 263-275.

⁵ “Culture is for the improvement of mankind,” Speech to representatives of culture at University of Coimbra, Portugal, May 15, 1982; found in *Portugal: Message of Fatima*, edited by Daughters of St Paul (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1983), pp. 159-160.

⁶ *Sources of Renewal*, pp. 299-300; also 98, 214, 265.

Man comes to a true and full humanity only through culture, that is through the cultivation of the goods and values of nature. Wherever human life is involved, therefore, nature and culture are quite intimately connected one with the other. The word “culture” in its general sense indicates everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities; he strives by his knowledge and his labor, to bring the world itself under his control. He renders social life more human both in the family and the civic community, through improvement of customs and institutions. Throughout the course of time he expresses, communicates and conserves in his works, great spiritual experiences and desires, that they might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family. §53

The fundamental idea is that man is a cultural being, its flows from his very personal nature as an intelligence with freedom. Human person creates culture and its the medium of his existence. It is through culture that man grows towards perfection and self-fulfillment.⁷ The ultimate business of culture is education. And education must integrate and convey the whole truth about man, it must offer an “integral humanism.” John Paul II said: “Culture must cultivate man and each man along the extension of an *integral and full-fledged humanism*, through which *the whole man and all men* are promoted in the *fullness of every human dimension*. Culture’s essential purpose is that of promoting the being of man, and of providing him with the goods needed for the development of his individual and social being.”⁸ Thus, the three fold set of priorities for overcoming the threats to mankind in the modern world are essentially priorities of culture. He will proceed to explain some aspects of these priorities in the following paragraphs of this section.

Section 16, paragraph 2: This is why all phases of present-day progress must be followed attentively. Each stage of that progress must, so to speak, be x-rayed from this point of view. What is in question

⁷ Alberto Freere, in *Apostolate of Culture*, pp. 62-63.

⁸ John Paul II “In the Work of Culture God has Made an Alliance with Man.” Rio de Janeiro, 1 July 1980.

is the advancement of persons, not just the multiplying of things that people can use. It is a matter--as a contemporary philosopher has said and as the Council has stated--not so much of "having more" as of "being more." Indeed there is already a real perceptible danger that, while man's dominion over the world of things is making enormous advances, he should lose the essential threads of his dominion and in various ways let his humanity be subjected to the world and become himself something subject to manipulation in many ways--even if the manipulation is often not perceptible directly--through the whole of the organization of community life, through the production system and through pressure from the means of social communication. Man cannot relinquish himself or the place in the visible world that belongs to him; he cannot become the slave of things, the slave of economic systems, the slave of production, the slave of his own products. A civilization purely materialistic in outline condemns man to such slavery, even if at times, no doubt, this occurs contrary to the intentions and the very premises of its pioneers. The present solicitude for man certainly has at its root this problem. It is not a matter here merely of giving an abstract answer to the question: Who is man? It is a matter of the whole of the dynamism of life and civilization. It is a matter of the meaningfulness of the various initiatives of everyday life and also of the premises for many civilization programs, political programs, economic ones, social ones, state ones, and many others.

John Paul II proposes that we look intently at modern progress in light of these principles, to "x-ray" our human world, looking for the lineaments of personalism and that which runs counter to it. So he begins to apply these principles, although still on a general level, to the priority of persons over things. "What is in question is the advancement of persons, not just the multiplying of things that people can use." The advancement of persons entails growth in virtues, knowledge and love. In his personalist philosophy this would be the leading principle. The other two support the priority of persons over things. John Paul II was influenced by French philosopher Gabriel Marcel who wrote an important book entitled "Being and Having"⁹ — thus he says "it is

⁹ Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having: An Existentialist Diary* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1965). See "outlines of a Phenomenology of Having," pp. 154-174. See

a matter--as a contemporary philosopher has said and as the Council has stated--not so much of ‘having more’ as of ‘being more.’”¹⁰ For the life of a person “being more” means being in relationship with others — we do not seek to acquire or to assimilate but to encounter the other.¹¹ The reference to *Gaudium et spes* is very helpful; the Council Fathers explain how to assess the notion of progress:

Human activity, to be sure, takes its significance from its relationship to man. Just as it proceeds from man, so it is ordered toward man. For when a man works he not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well. He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself. Rightly understood, this kind of growth is of greater value than any external riches which can be garnered. A man is more precious for what he is than for what he has. Similarly, all that men do to obtain greater justice, wider brotherhood, a more humane disposition of social relationships has greater worth than technical advances. For these advances can supply the material for human progress, but of themselves alone they can never actually bring it about. Hence, the norm of human activity is this: that in accord with the divine plan and will, it harmonize with the genuine good of the human race, and that it allow men as individuals and as members of society to pursue their total vocation and fulfill it.

The focus on “being” over “having” should raise the question, “what is it to be human?” We must attempt to see the “whole man” or what John Paul II refers to as “the whole truth about man,” not man measured by partial or illusory standards. He wants us to keep in

introduction to *A Gabriel Marcel reader*, edited by Brendan Sweetman (South Bend: St Augustine Press, 2011).

¹⁰ See also Paul VI to the diplomatic corps, Jan 7 1965: “C’est bien là, en effet, qu’il faut chercher la solution d’un des problèmes majeurs de notre époque: il ne suffit pas que l’homme grandisse dans ce qu’il a, il faut qu’il grandisse dans ce qu’il est.” Also *Populorum Progressio* §14, “Development cannot be limited to mere economic growth. In order to be authentic it must be integral, that is, it has to promote the good of every man and of the whole man.” Pope Paul VI is deeply influenced by Jacques Maritain’s *Integral Humanism* and De Lubac’s *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism*. See footnotes 44 and 45.

¹¹ See entry on Gabriel Marcel in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

view the idea of a “total vocation” and an “integral humanism.” With this in view, we can understand why he challenges the contemporary civilization with its focus on things and the realm of “having.” It is not that we do not need things, or that we must understand our lives in terms of both being and having — he is not preaching a strict ascetism or railing against the productivity of modern economies. But he is warning of the danger that we can lose our interiority and our freedom as we are swamped by the externals, the acquisition and having, and become enslaved in new ways to the very things that we hoped would free us from drudgery and pain. “He cannot become the slave of things, the slave of economic systems, the slave of production, the slave of his own products.” John Paul II preaches Christian liberty. The way of Christ is the way of liberty. The message should have a special appeal in modern culture as people begin to experience the hazard of enslavement to products, systems, false expectations and envy. The root of the error is the lack of an appreciation of human interiority and the life of spirit. It is a problem of a materialistic philosophy of life, articulated in very different ways in Marxism and in capitalism. “A civilization purely materialistic in outline condemns man to such slavery, even if at times, no doubt, this occurs contrary to the intentions and the very premises of its pioneers.” The founders and pioneers of modern civilization championed human freedom and liberation. But they could not sustain nor fulfill what they originally promised. A root is the anthropological question, what is to be human, but an anthropology that is historical and cultural, not an abstract. He wishes to bring Christians to become aware of and critically engage culture — “the whole of the dynamism of life and civilization. It is a matter of the meaningfulness of the various initiatives of everyday life.” We must become radical, and go to the roots of the crisis, to identify and to challenge the assumptions or “the premises for many civilization programs, political programs, economic ones, social ones, state ones.” Such premises of human programs in educational, social and political life must be critically evaluated in light of this dynamic and interlocking three fold set of the priority of ethics over

technology, the primacy of the person over things, and the superiority of spirit over matter.

Ethos, Person and Spirit – Principles of Cultural and Social Renewal

Summary

The Author claims that we must attempt to see the “whole man” or what John Paul II refers to as “the whole truth about man,” not man measured by partial or illusory standards. He wants us to keep in view the idea of a “total vocation” and an “integral humanism.” With this in view, we can understand why he challenges the contemporary civilization with its focus on things and the realm of “having.” It is not that we do not need things, or that we must understand our lives in terms of both being and having — he is not preaching a strict ascetism or railing against the productivity of modern economies. But he is warning of the danger that we can lose our interiority and our freedom as we are swamped by the externals, the acquisition and having, and become enslaved in new ways to the very things that we hoped would free us from drudgery and pain. John Paul II preaches Christian liberty. The way of Christ is the way of liberty. The message should have a special appeal in modern culture as people begin to experience the hazard of enslavement to products, systems, false expectations and envy. The root of the error is the lack of an appreciation of human interiority and the life of spirit. It is a problem of a materialistic philosophy of life, articulated in very different ways in Marxism and in capitalism. The founders and pioneers of modern civilization championed human freedom and liberation. But they could not sustain nor fulfill what they originally promised. A root is the anthropological question, what is to be human, but an anthropology that is historical and cultural, not an abstract.

Key words: ethos, person, spirit, John Paul II, integral humanism, anthropology, cultural renewal, social renewal.