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THE REBIRTH OR DEATH OF EUROPE?

In the Christian's dialogue with the secular world, one can no longer ignore, under the excuse of being academic or ecumenical and open-minded, that the refusal to receive one's being from God and to render it back to God as a gift, and the consequent decision to appropriate, or keep it for oneself, are the direct and sole reason for the overwhelming misery and injustice suffered by men in the contemporary world.

Increasingly, in different parts of Europe and in different contexts one hears the common term "ours." The word indicates, on the face of it, that idea that there is something common, something that is shared, something that binds "us" together. Yet the term can hide a bitter irony because even in affirming the bond that ties us into some unity, it can negate the individual in acts which separate him from what is "ours" and even "his." Perhaps the best evidence of this is the strange silence about "our" children, and hence about our *own humanity* in the midst of all the rhetoric about a common life and a common future. Because of this silence, the category of what is "our" becomes formally similar to that insistence on the individualistic, ethnic and nationalist "mine" and "ours" which has shown its consequence in the "Bosnian Evil."

Abortion is a crime not only against the individual, it is a crime against humanity. Abortion separates the criminal not only from the victim but from humanity itself. By its very nature, it forces every human into solidarity with the victim, and makes each and every human being into a victim. As such it is a symptom of the specific negation of and systematic attack against human dignity. There can be no rebuilding, no reform and no rebirth in Eastern and Central Europe, there can be no stopping of the death of Western Europe unless there first occurs a reaffirmation of the dignity of the human person. But this too is a paradox, for the salvation of Europe will not occur if the affirmation of human dignity is a means, a way of saving Europe. For then, human dignity will still be abused because it is used as a means. Our own salvation cannot be the end. But in the end, it will be the consequence of affirming human dignity as the image of God, the means of affirming God for His sake, not ours. The rest shall be given us.

There are a number of elements that enter into the foundation and affirmation of the dignity of man. They are all inseparable and all necessary. Yet one aspect of that dignity can serve as a focus that is particularly suited to highlight the unique and specific evil of the age as well as indicate the way to the affirmation of that dignity.

In the thought and the teachings of Pope John Paul II, who can be called "the Pope of the Dignity of Man," the central aspect, an echo of *Gaudium et spes*, No. 24, is constantly affirmed as an antithesis to the spirit of the age. It is the simple but profound truth that man, as a person, has a vocation of giving himself to others, and ultimately to God. Only a person is capable of giving himself.

In the encyclical *Veritatis splendor* we are taught that the heart of morality is the *response of love* (No. 10) in which the individual, in imitation of Christ, makes a *total gift of self* (*ibidem*, No. 15). This repeats a central truth of *Dives in misericordia*, in which, speaking of God's love, John Paul II adds, "And he who loves, desires to give himself" (No. 7). The decisive criterion for understanding the social dimension is the essential orientation and vocation of each individual to his "neighbour." And thus the key to the proper understanding of *Centesimus annus* is a phrase that is as brief as it is rich in significance: work is "*work with and for others.*"

Properly understood, the above truths are a scandal and an offence to the modern age because they affirm that man's vocation *is to be for others*. But they lose their scandalous character if they are given a humanitarian interpretation. For the humanitarian and the humanist is willing to be an altruist in as much as he affirms that *self-interest* has as its *consequence* a benefit for the other.

The truth about the human vocation has to be put into a perspective that is directly relevant to the age and expressed in such a way as to strip all pretence from the posture of benevolent humanism that is assumed by our age. We can do this with the simple statement: if only a person can *give* himself... so too, only a person is capable of *appropriating*.

The first – this capacity to give oneself – is the expression of the vocation to self-donation. The second – a tendency to take and appropriate – is the terrible possibility of perverting that vocation.

The first, as Wojtyła, and now John Paul II, saw¹, is an expression of the situation of man: his being is a *gift* which calls for the reciprocity of a self-donation in gratitude to the donor, who is God. It indicates, if we understand it properly, three distinct and essentially connected moments. Man is

¹ Cf. T. S t y c z e ń, E. B a l a w a j d e r, *Jedynie prawda wyzwala. Rozmowy o Janie Pawle II* (Only Truth Liberates. Conversation about John Paul II), Polski Instytut Kultury Chrześcijańskiej, Rome 1987, p. 35.

called to *receive* the gift of self; he is called to *take possession of that self*; and finally, he is called to an “exchange” of gifts in that act of gratitude, which involves a *giving of self*.

The second – the taking and appropriating – may become a perversion of the human vocation, when it *refuses to render the gift of self*. As a consequence, the act of self-possession becomes central and final, and makes receptivity impossible. In refusing to give, man also refuses to receive. Instead of receiving, the creature *appropriates*. And loses possession of his self. Yet, the gesture of appropriation is not simply impotent, in its impotence it brings destruction and death to everything touched by its appropriating grasp.

Here we see the fundamental contrast and opposition of which Christ spoke in His words, “He who would save his life” – that is, keep it for himself – “will lose it; he who will lose his life for my sake” – that is, give it to me unconditionally – “will find it.”

A sophisticated secular age promises us its “good will” if we only bracket the divine and the supernatural in our dialogue about man, about the one thing that we have in “common,” namely “our” humanity. This is its condition for allowing the Christian to participate in a common endeavour for the “good” of humanity.

But ecumenism and courtesy does not require and justice forbids silence about the so-called “mistakes,” and some may even say the necessary “cost” levied by the secular age on the road to human progress. For the human misery and suffering in their vast scope and monumental depth are not the result of an innocent mistake. They are, indeed, the price exacted for the progress of humanity, promised to all but accessible only to the few. One cannot be silent about the mendacity of a humanism that expects the crumbs of its own surfeited satisfaction to trickle down, as welfare, to those deprived of human dignity. Silence about the evil of the age will not lead to unity or solidarity, but only to collusion in evil.

The fundamental word of the secular age is “Mine,” as Wojtyła noted in a sermon on “Fatherhood.” In more technical language, we can understand the issue as one of “private property.” The decisive question, then, becomes “To whom does man belong?” Both Christ and Marx agree that this is the crucial question. It is the first and the last question. And the answer to it determines man’s beginning and his end. But only one answer is the beginning of man, of his rebirth and life; the other brings it to an end and death. Yet both answers consist of the self same identical word: “Mine!”

“To whom does man belong?” Christ’s answer is: “Mine.” Man belongs to Christ for he has been purchased at a great price, the *sacrifice* in which Christ *offered* His human life in exchange for divine life for man. Christ accomplished the exchange with one liturgical word, spoken to the Father: “Thine.”

“To whom does man belong?” Marx’s answer, in the name of man, *repeats* the same word, “Mine!” And thus, “man” *appropriates* himself, he becomes “his own” but only *by the theft* of what belongs to Christ and to his neighbour. It is singularly instructive that even while reappropriating man for himself, Marx saw fit to destroy the centre of individuality, that which is the most intimate and deepest property of man, his freedom. It was no longer the individual, but humanity that was to be saved.

In the Christian’s dialogue with the secular world, one can no longer ignore, under the excuse of being academic or ecumenical and open-minded, that the *refusal to receive one’s being* from God and to render it back to God as a gift, and the consequent decision to appropriate, or keep it for oneself, are the direct and sole reason for the overwhelming misery and injustice suffered by men in the contemporary world.

In *Centesimus annus*, John Paul II reminds this world that the *earth itself is a gift* from God (No. 37). For the secular age it is merely a condition, and therefore, only a means for survival. In the same encyclical, he reminds us that *man, too, is a gift to man*. But here too, the secular age proclaims the sovereignty and freedom and the rights of man, refusing to receive the gift and becoming incapable of giving it. Only *appropriation* remains, coming to expression in the world “Mine,” the central word in the new liturgy of consumption.

The real and awesome *power of man to possess himself* finds its true meaning only if it stands between the two “poles” of *receptivity* and *self-donation*. The requirement to be receptive is grounded in the *origin* of man. He is not merely created, he is *given* his life as a *gift* from God. The requirement of self-donation is grounded in the *goal* and end of his life, the same God, who “desired to give Himself” because He loved man. Thus, in answer to the question, “To whom does man belong?” we cannot simply *repeat* the words of Christ, as if we too were gods. Much rather, we are called to *respond* to the Word of God, who says “mine” of His own. And the “*response due* to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man” (No. 10), to take the words of one of the central passages from *Veritatis splendor*, – the response due is the word and the act “Thine” – the total gift of self (*ibidem*, No. 15).

Two reflections are in order. They concern the true nature of society and therefore have important implications for the political order and the current crisis. Both refer to the central and decisive notion of *transcendence*. In the last mentioned encyclical, John Paul II notes that all men have the *same* Origin and the *same* Goal.

Unlike animals of the same species, who have in each instance a *similar* origin and a similar goal, men have the *same* origin and goal. In the case of animals, there are as many goals as there individual animals. In the case of man, the one and the same goal is ordained for all men. This has radical implications for understanding the social character of man.

Being for others, giving oneself for others has absolutely no sense, indeed, it would be an absurdity if the other simply had an *immanent* end, his own self-development and self-satisfaction. It would be inconceivable, indeed impossible to find a reason why one would *transcend* himself and actively turn to the other *for his sake* if the other, in his turn, were essentially and necessarily oriented in an *immanent* direction, toward a self-actualization and self-satisfaction, or as it is often called today, the realization of human potential. Of His many creatures, it is only man whom God created for his own sake, but only so that man can give himself to “the other” for the sake of the other (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, No. 24). Two *self-centred individuals* can exchange services in the pursuit of their respective and even similar ends, but they *can never* share and *participate in each other’s* pursuit. Their pursuit can never be one pursuit, because they do not have one goal.

The Pope’s distinction, in his recent *Letter to Families*, between communion and community is decisive.² If we reflect on it, we can see that communion, the direct “I-Thou” relationship in which each becomes united to the other in order to share in one life would be impossible unless each transcended to a dimension that stands *above both*. The “being at one with the other” depends on the relation of each to a vertical dimension that transcends both. We can love an infant by virtue of the fact that he is an image of God, Who transcends him. But it would be difficult, indeed impossible to give oneself in a nuptial act to an infant, or someone like an infant who has never transcended himself. The other becomes lovable in a way that allows *communion* only if he or she *responds* to the transcendent domain of truth, goodness and beauty which transcends the individual as such. The other becomes a “candidate” for communion only to the extent, to use another concept central to both *Veritatis splendor* and *Pastores dabo vobis*, that he *conforms* himself to a transcendent reality and ultimately to Christ. The response of *conformity to the transcendent* makes the other lovable and visible in his inner personal secret. This same response to the transcendent makes community also possible, a *community* in which “*we together*” participate in each other’s response to and pursuit of the same transcendent goal. Only then is it possible to act in *solidarity*: perform a common act, to share one life, to be one body.

² Cf. *Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), No. 7. The *Letter to Families* is an extraordinary focus on and profound development of the notion of the “gift of self” that is, perhaps, the most important conceptual element of the “truth about man” and the “truth about God” that are central in the thought of this “Pope of the dignity of Man.” Not only is the theological anthropology of the “gift of self” unprecedented in theoretical literature, it also reaches a high point in the teachings of John Paul II in his *Letter to Families*.

The civil and secular order, as is abundantly evident in our secularized culture, has rejected the dimension of vertical transcendence between man and God as well as the horizontal transcendence between man and man.³ Political and social structures are articulated on the implicit and increasingly more explicit premise that man lives *for himself*, with the inevitable consequence that only the most powerful ones are able to do so with any satisfaction. Any “cooperation” resolves itself in economic terms as an *exchange*. The same structures, and the culture of consumerism which they facilitate, make it increasingly difficult to actively live for the other and to educate one’s children to do so. Thus, the overwhelming role of the concept of “rights” which allows only the unconditional “mine” of appropriation and consumption but makes it difficult or impossible to realize the “Thine” of self-donation.

The State, unlike the Church, has no direct role and no competence with regard to the inner word, “Thine,” that accompanies the act of self-giving. Its specific mission is justice, the defense and protection of that which is legitimately “mine.” But its limited competence and mission does not and should not allow it to *abolish* the dimension of transcendence that is essential to the proper understanding of human nature. In other words, because it does not have the temporal power or competence to enforce man’s obligation to receive what has been given to him as a gift and to gift to others, *does not mean that it can bracket receptivity and self-donation as if they were non-existent*. When the secular order rejects this two-fold matrix and foundation of self-possession, it radically perverts the meaning of self-possession into a simple and *unconditional* “right” to appropriation. The political consequence of this are structures that dispossess and expropriate man from what is truly given to him and is truly his own.⁴

The practical consequence of bracketing *receptivity and self-donation* as integral aspects of human existence and as the foundation of society is a strict exclusion of the *origin and the goal* of human existence from public life. And that is a crime. Such bracketing is also a strict and formal exclusion of the

³ Cf. *Centesimus annus*, No. 7, in which John Paul II indicates that atheism is one of the sources of error about the person and the “subjectivity” of society. He clearly notes that in the response to the call of God, man realizes his transcendent dignity. At the same time, a rejection of God leads to a reorganization of society.

⁴ Cf. *Centesimus annus*, No. 41, where John Paul explicitly ties the vocation of self-donation to social structures: “As a person he can give himself to another person or to other persons, and ultimately to God, who is the author of his being and who alone can fully accept his gift. A man is alienated if he refuses to transcend himself and to live the experience of self-giving and of the formation of an authentic human community oriented towards his final destiny, which is God. A society is alienated if its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer this gift of self and to establish this solidarity between people.”

other as source and goal of human life. It *destroys parenthood*, which is the source of a community and common life, and it *destroys marriage* as the “embodiment” of the highest form of mutual self-giving. This too is a crime.

It has become progressively clearer that the radical divergence in the understanding of man’s vocation and destiny makes dialogue increasingly difficult between Christianity and the secular age. The criminal activity of the age is hidden behind a “human face” and a love of “humanity,” which cannot, however, disguise a hatred of God.

With the impossibility of dialogue and persuasion, the alternative is clear. It must take the way of the *response due* to God and neighbour, not only in the inner word of *conformity* to both but also in the *external action* of self-donation.⁵ This action must and can take place first on the individual level. On that individual level it will have to be an imitation of Christ, who ransomed those who were His own, exchanging His life for ours. We too are called to give up something of ourselves *in order to ransom* those whose lives are being appropriated and consumed by the secular age. Only then will the foundations be laid for a new community in which the members can also be bound in a free communion to others because they give themselves to rather than consume the others.

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⁵ The inner unity of the inner response of conformity and the external behaviour is the specific theme of *Veritatis splendor*, written to counter the error of those consequentialist theologians who would separate them.