

## EVANGELIZING CULTURE

# CULTIVATING THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

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The problem of culture is by no means new to those engaged in the art of preaching and teaching Christianity. Melito of Sardis sought to persuade a primarily Jewish-Christian audience that the proper way to celebrate the Passover could only be understood by a typological reading of the Scriptures. Augustine of Hippo responded to an often lax congregation (both intellectual and morally) through a brilliant, poetic exegesis of the Scriptures deeply connected to moral formation. John Henry Newman countered the religion of the day—one that was dismissive of any religious practices judged too extreme, too intellectually and morally demanding, too “churchy”—through a close reading of Christian doctrine, the arguments of a natural theology, and a frequent attention to the formative function of liturgical, sacramental, and spiritual practices learned within the Church. Effective teachers, preachers, pastoral leaders across history form the imaginations of Christians who find it difficult both to believe and live the central teachings of Christian faith in specific cultural contexts.

For this reason, I often grimace when I hear leadership in the Church (both ordained and lay) rely on an overly simplistic condemnation of culture in assessing the difficulty of forming Christians in faith in the present day. “In today’s culture, no one cares about the Eucharist.” “All the modern world is concerned with is consumption of alcohol and sex.” “Teens can’t hear the Gospel because of the culture of social media.” Of course, my argument is not to say that every facet of culture should be considered as hospitable to the discipleship of self-gift intrinsic to Christian faith. Rather, the problem with such attitudes is that they’re non-diagnostic. They don’t offer an explanation for why it might be difficult to care about the Eucharist, why emerging adults seek some release from daily life through alcohol and drugs, and what sort of desires are met through an often addictive engagement in social media. Perhaps, upon closer examination, the problem isn’t the modern cultural imagination but the tepidness of the preaching. One wouldn’t know until such an assessment of the malaise was performed by the preacher or catechist.

A further difficulty with a simple dismissal of culture is that the catechist or preacher risks denying the important theological truth that the Church is not called to look with suspicion upon the world but rather to read “the signs of the times,” of culture, of society in the realistic light of the Gospel itself (*Gaudium et Spes*, §4). Again, this approach to culture does not mean a tacit approval of “the world”—of pornography and sexual abuse, of a form of consumption that reduces the human person to an economic growth model, of the inertia of a Congress that often seeks self-promotion above the common good. The goal is not to reduce the Church to the “culture of the day” in an effort to evangelize (a national youth ministry gathering in which conspicuous consumption may play a more primary role than we should be comfortable

with). Nor for that matter should the catechist seek a blanket condemnation of “culture” in general. Instead, the catechist or preacher seeks to treat culture as a series of “signs” to be interpreted through the lens of the Gospel in order to discern what primary motivations or desires (however perverted such desires might be) underlie the various images and practices that constitute the imagination of a specific culture.

Of course, a question remains unanswered: what do you mean by culture? Quoting the Anglican theologian Graham Ward, culture is “certain semiotic systems that produce shared knowledges and values among groups of people, constituting their beliefs about the nature of reality...a symbolic world-view, embedded, reproduced and modified through specific social practices” (*Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 5). An example illustrating this definition of culture may be something as basic as what it means to call oneself a Bostonian. A Bostonian exists in a world in which you root for the Red Sox, you treat traffic lights as suggestions, and you learn an elaborate system of honks to denote your displeasure while driving (to name a few signs and practices related to life in Boston). This definition of culture is in fact somewhat consistent with what early Christianity understood about culture, especially Augustine. An Augustinian approach to culture perceived the various cultural practices of the Greco-Roman world as inscribing one within a worldview. The function of Christian preaching was to “ascribe” certain practices, exercises, intended to move one toward that worldview expressed in the Church. Culture as a whole wasn’t condemned—rather, like an acute psychologist, the preacher sought to discern the underlying desire or worldview—and in fact use it in “incarnating” the Gospel in the present. Such an approach to preaching (linked closely to the work of rhetoric) was known as psychagogy.

The purpose of this column, appearing in *Church Life*

for the first time, is two-fold. First, I seek to offer a deeper reading of various images and practices of contemporary culture in the United States. The purpose of this reading is not intended to be comprehensive, as if one could treat every aspect of what constitutes “American culture”. Rather, I invite the reader to pay attention to the method of reading the signs of the times as a habit that he or she is invited to learn. Second, I hope to show how such desires might be “re-formed” through the medicine of specific

doctrines and practices intrinsic to the Catholic life; to perform a contemporary psychagogy as a resource for the catechist and preacher. The hope is that this second step might lead the reader to an approach of an evangelizing apologetic that does not deny the world, but opens up the horizon of the one being evangelized to the transformative power of the Gospel within the contours of his or her own cultural world. Quoting Ward in another context:

If Christian apologetics is to ‘speak’ to the culture they are addressing, then without the in-depth reading of the culture they will not be effective; people won’t listen because the apologetics is not helping them to understand something about that culture that they have not seen before; the apologetics is not helping them to understand the lives, values, activities that socially embed them in a specific cultural terrain. Apologetics, viewed in this way, assists the Gospel in setting people free—from false desires, assumed needs, bewitching ideas, unreflected habits and substitutions for the real objects of their longing—to worship God and recognize the true orientation of the human heart toward such worship (“Cultural Hermeneutics and Christian Apologetics” in *Imaginative Apologetics*, 125).

Likewise, if the New Evangelization is to seek a transformation of culture itself, a renewal of all human existence according to the Gospel, then we must move away from both a naïve capitulation and narrow condemnation of culture toward a sophisticated diagnosis of the hopes and longings (sometimes false) inscribed in various cultural practices. And we must move beyond a pessimism that the Gospel cannot penetrate such darkness toward a hopeful posture that *the light shines into the darkness and the darkness shall not conquer it* (Jn 1:5).

