

MUSINGS FROM THE EDITOR



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DEAR READERS

One of the persistent interpretative concerns relative to articulating the “spirit” of the Second Vatican Council is the Church’s relationship to culture. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) makes clear that the pilgrim Church does not seek to ascend above the societal, cultural, or historical. Rather, as the document states:

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of people united in Christ and guided by the holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father’s kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity. That is why they cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history (§1).

This theme within *Gaudium et Spes*, incarnate in the document's exhortation to "read the signs of the times" (§4) is more fully articulated in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. The document reminds its readers that:

The Church journeys along the roads of history together with all of humanity. She lives in the world, and although not of the world (cf. Jn 17:14-16) she is called to serve the world according to her innermost vocation. This attitude, found also in the present document, is based on the deep conviction that just as it is important for the world to recognize the Church as a reality of history and a leaven in history, so too it is important for the Church to recognize what she has received from history and from the development of the human race. The Second Vatican Council gave an eloquent demonstration of solidarity, respect and affection for the whole human family by engaging in dialogue with it about many problems, 'bringing the light kindled from the Gospel and putting at the disposal of the human race the saving resources which the Church has received from her Founder under the promptings of the Holy Spirit. It is man himself who must be saved; it is human society which must be renewed' (§18).

Thus, one is correct to discern in the Second Vatican Council an explicit commitment to engagement with history and culture alike. The Church cannot become sectarian, a closed society of the saved who gaze with abject horror upon the rest of the world. The vocation of the Church is to unite all of humanity in that Eucharistic peace characteristic of the closing chapters

of Augustine's *City of God*. The Church's involvement in politics, in the production of the arts, in dialogue with believers and non-believers alike is an expression of a vocation to love humanity in all of its particularity. The Church's identity is not simply the promotion of herself but the renewal of the whole human family.

The calling of the Church to reveal to humanity, through culture itself, the fullness of our own vocation can be exaggerated if one is not careful. If sectarianism is one extreme relative to articulating the Church's relationship with culture, then it is equally true that assimilation is another. The Church, of course, receives her identity from the culture of those members who make up her body. But not every facet of humanity is necessarily oriented toward that divine love revealed in Christ (we call this sin). The same cultural milieu that offers the possibility of authentic love, of works of justice that unite the human family may also be a place in which humanity is reduced to a consumer or producer, in which the reality of death is perceived as a medical failure (and not as the ultimate opportunity for the Eucharistic offering of self), and human sexuality becomes a pornographic spectacle rather than a form of gift. In these situations, the Church is called toward a certain "Gospel" critique of culture. The Church does not criticize a specific facet of culture because she hates humanity; rather, because the Church's fundamental vocation is to gaze upon her Bridegroom, the Word made flesh, she knows what it means to be fully human. The critique of culture that the Church offers is not founded upon a Manichean hatred of the world. Rather, she seeks to lead humanity to the fullness of divine life—a life that may unfold even now in culture and society alike.

For this reason, there is a need to worry about cultural assimilation within the Church. One is not against an incarnational Christology because one is cautious of too readily adopting liturgical forms and practices, catechetical formulae, and norms of success or political discourse drawn from the "secular world." The Catholic Church is not exempt from confusing authentic human development as manifested in the Gospel with the creed of Joel Osteen or a form of political messianism in which all hope is placed in temporal political action. To offer culture as equivalent to the kerygma, no matter how beautiful this culture might be, is to risk one day passing on not the gift of the Word made flesh but our own particular vision, which is ultimately not the source of salvation. It is to erase that particular identity of the Church which enables it to exist within the world but to transcend the geo-political, philosophical, and societal movements of any particular time. The Church offers to the world a vision of what humanity *can become* through participation in the Eucharistic life of the Christian. A naïve embracing of every assumption, every "sign of the time" (no matter how effective we might believe this sign to be for cultivating new ecclesial membership) is to fail to proclaim the "newness" of the Gospel, that very quality that enables the kerygma to become flesh in each and every culture in the world.

Of course, the Church is not herself exempt from this cultural criticism founded upon the Incarnation. In fact, this is the genius of Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. In chapter two of the document, he examines the cultural challenges present in today's world. But he then turns this Christological critique upon her pastoral workers:

Pastoral workers can thus fall into a relativism which, whatever their particular style of spirituality or way of thinking, proves even more dangerous than doctrinal relativism. It has to do with the deepest and inmost decisions that shape their way of life. This practical relativism consists in acting as if God did not exist, making decisions as if the poor did not exist, setting goals as if others did not exist, working as if people who have not received the Gospel did not exist. It is striking that even some who clearly have solid doctrinal and spiritual convictions frequently fall into a lifestyle which leads to an attachment to financial security, or to a desire for power or human glory at all costs, rather than giving their lives to others in mission. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm! (§80)

Thus, the Church herself can form a culture, which is inimical to the logic of divine love revealed in Christ. Our pastoral leaders may shape church policy not according to the beauty of the Word made flesh but as a way of maintaining their own power and control at all costs. Staff meetings at parishes may neuter the missionary enthusiasm of the People of God in order to avoid upsetting the movers and shakers of the parish. Theologians and pastoral leaders may be so committed to their particular agenda that they are willing to embrace forms of rhetorical violence and discord that enable them to win points against the "conservatives" or "liberals," all the while fostering disillusionment

among younger generations relative to the joy of the Christian life. In each instance, the Church has turned away from the emptiness of divine love revealed in Christ, choosing instead power, prestige, and narratives of success not discernable in the kenotic love of Christ. Such cultures must be broken apart through structural renewal so that the Church may more perfectly manifest to the world the kind of flourishing made possible through life in Christ. Yet such renewal commences with a perfect conforming of each member of the Body of Christ to the logic of self-gift that the Church announces in her kerygma and remembers in her liturgical offering.

Perhaps, then, the “icon” of the Church’s understanding of the relationship between culture and herself (and thus an interpretative problem of the Second Vatican Council) is the religious procession. My wife has often described what it was like to celebrate Holy Thursday at a local parish in the heart of central London; a parish in which rich and poor gathered for the Eucharistic rites of the Church. At the conclusion of the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, the priest and the acolytes left the Soho church and began to process through Leicester Square, passing by groups of men and women emerging from strip joints and bars. This local parish did not remain locked inside, fearful that the Eucharistic presence of Christ would be soiled by an encounter with urban London. The procession took place in history, in time, in a specific location. The rites of the Church were not meant to be locked inside, cordoned off from the world. The parish, as one would not be surprised to learn, was deeply involved in the lives of those on the margins in this area of Soho.

Yet, at the same time, the Eucharistic presence of Christ was de-stabilizing to those who encountered the sacramental procession. It interrupted the quotidian, at times amoral, activities of a Thursday evening preceding a holiday. The particularity of the practice, its “sacred” character, was what made it strange to those who encountered it. The *Tantum ergo* echoing out across this urban landscape invited those along the procession route to see beyond the sensible, the tangible, to the ultimate reality at the heart of existence. The members of this procession who sang this ancient hymn served as “sacramental” reminders of a tradition

embodied not simply in the ideal but in a people who have dedicated themselves to the practice of self-giving love. The incense floating into the night sky of London sanctified the streets around that urban church, a vision of the political transformation made possible by the peaceful worship of the Church. Each member of that procession was invited to consider anew if their Eucharistic worship was entirely oriented toward the *mandatum* they had practiced earlier; or if, gazing into the eyes of humanity along that procession route, they came to see how stingy their own capacity for love was.

Indeed, perhaps it is the theology of the procession which may best enable us to think about how the Church may relate to culture. The Church cannot move away from history, from a specific time and place, from engagement in the world. Nor for that matter can it simply be co-extensive with that world. Instead, the Church is to become that Eucharistic pilgrimage in which city streets and buildings and farm lands and the entire created order are brought into divine life. For us that pilgrimage will extend into each culture within the human family, to all the ways that the embodied person becomes a place for the Word to take flesh; each of these cultures comes to offer distinctive gifts that will allow Christ’s Body to manifest the fullness of human beauty become divine.

