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Walk According to the Light: An Illustration from North America

1. Faith and Culture

Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., published a doctoral thesis entitled *Inculturation and Ecclesial Communion*.¹ In this 1990 book, he explored the ways in which Pope John Paul II, up to that period in his pontificate, that is, through the late 80s, had made the dialogue between faith and culture a familiar theme of his Magisterium. Like much that John Paul II has taught from the chair of Peter, this innovative instruction has gained notice throughout the whole world.

Consider the United States of America. If one had inquired in the early 80s of a typical American Catholic about "culture," the best one could have expected to hear was a word or two about museums or opera houses. The theretofore almost exclusively European employment of the word "culture" to represent everything that the human person makes in order to promote the well being of concrete human existence, was not widespread in the United States. The Pope has changed this pattern, so that now even non-Catholic politicians routinely refer to the culture of death or of life or of other things to signify exactly what John Paul II says culture is about. In short, "Culture," he tells us, "is a characteristic of human life as such."²

It will be interesting to observe to what extent this understanding of culture, which reflects fairly sophisticated philosophical and anthropological viewpoints, survives the much anticipated large-scale technological transformation of human life. Will citizens of some new and brave world be able one day to step back, and to reflect on a global culture of the Web. . . ? Or will they be so captured by it that they will have forgotten about its human origins? No sure answer presently exists.

¹ Francis E. George, O.M.I., *Inculturation and Ecclesial Communion. Culture and Church in the Teaching of Pope John Paul II* (Rome: Urbaniana Press, 1990).

² AAS, 72 (1980): 735-752 (no. 6).

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Still, how many people inquire, for instance, whether e-mail promotes or impedes authentically human communication? For the time being though, culture has come to be accepted as referring broadly to that tremendous complexity that emerges when human beings start to live properly human lives together.³

It is not my purpose in this brief intervention to summarize the rich and suggestive instruction that Pope John Paul II has provided for us on the dynamic that inheres in the relationship between man and culture. Except to point out the obvious. The Pope has made and continues to make it his concern to remind us of the place that religion holds in culture. Theorists of culture who proceed without taking the religious aspirations of the human person into full account occupy no place at the Pope's ideal dialogue table, unless of course they arrive open to conversion. It is well known, as I have said, that the Pope's philosophical outlook on culture reflects his personal study of (mainly) modern European thinkers, and that his views have been translated into action steps, among the most noticeable of which remains the establishment of the Pontifical Council for Culture.

2. Culture and Evangelization

Cardinal George's thesis examines how cultural attitudes may affect evangelization. Consider one example.⁴ Shortly after the founding of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in the late nineteenth century by Saint Eugene de Mazenod, the priests of the Congregation arrived in Canada to work among the North American Indians. In 1894, an Oblate missionary, Father Bounald, reported that, and I quote, "in general, our Christians have the faith. Some have a solid, unshakeable faith." But he then went on to wonder to what extent their native-read

³ A definition that reflects this interpretation is found in the proceeding of an International Conference on Cultural Policies sponsored by UNESCO in Mexico City in 1982. For an account, see *Inculturation*, pp. 153-4. The Holy Father of course emphasizes the role that religion plays in this complexity.

⁴ See George, *Inculturation*, p. 173-77.

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“cultural”—dispositions overlapped with their religious practices. Without using the term, Father Bounald was inquiring about inculturation. The priest noted that the native Christians’ attachment to confession may have been facilitated by their own proclivity—read “cultural bent”—to boast about their exploits of whatever kind, even immoral ones. One may reflect that since there was no ‘reality’ T.V., other outlets for self-serving exhibitionism were discovered.

There is something important to learn from the reported native proclivities of these Catholics of Canada: One cannot take the transformation of culture for granted. It always results from a special action of divine providence. The Gospel must penetrate deeply human existence. That Catholic missionaries of the nineteenth century understood the distinctively theological nature of their missionary roles may be inferred from a poignant observation found elsewhere in Father Bounald’s report.

Once when the Oblate missionaries had been alerted to the devastating effects that threatened a settlement struck by infectious diseases, they hastened to minister the last sacraments to the Indians. [In retrospect, this incident also affords a good glimpse of how Catholic evangelization can disintegrate; it would be difficult today in many places in North America to find priests who are prepared to hasten to the deathbeds of Christians.] Once the nineteenth-century missionaries arrived at the settlement [and not without having endured considerable more difficulty than the average suburban priest might experience driving his car to a hospital at three o’clock in the morning], they discovered only the corpses of their converts. They also found something else: small sheets of paper attached to each dead person’s clothing. On these bits of paper were written notes detailing the sins that the Indians had wanted their priests to absolve.⁵ Inculturation and ecclesial communion had reached the point of saving coincidence.

Father Bounald’s report about the disease-stricken village still instructs us. This anecdote, one among many that illustrate the Church’s perennial missionary vitality, invites us to inquire how it happened that a nineteenth-century North American Indian, who it may be assumed enjoyed

⁵ **George, *Inculturation*, p. 174.**

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nothing to compare with the formation available to his European counterparts living in a centuries-old Catholic culture, so easily discovered the salvific meaning of the words inscribed around the top of St Peter's Basilica: "... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16: 19)? The answer of course lies, as I have remarked, in the mystery of predestination. Predestination describes the procession of grace at work in the dynamic that binds a free human person with the God who desires the salvation of all men. Statistics about predestination are available only to God; all the believer can do is to devote himself to the works of predestination. Foremost among these is a fruitful and frequent participation in the Blessed Eucharist. The Oblate Missionaries inherited from their founder a special love for the Eucharist which formed part of the heritage that he himself had received from the school of seventeenth-century French priestly piety. The native Canadian Catholics, it must be assumed, had come to love deeply the Mass.

3. Eucharist and the Moral Life

If one were to hazard a guess about what prompted the fever-ridden Indians to make their last act one of petition for forgiveness, it would be difficult to exclude what they had learned about and experienced in the Eucharist. This should come as no surprise. In his latest encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Pope John Paul II adverts to the way that the Eucharist affects the moral life. "Proclaiming the death of the Lord 'until he comes' (1 Cor 11:26) requires that all who take part in the Eucharist remain committed to changing their lives and to making them in a certain way completely 'Eucharistic.' Transfigured human existence and commitment to transforming the world in accordance with Gospel truth splendidly illustrates the eschatological tension inherent in the celebration of the Eucharist and in the Christian life as a whole: 'Come Lord Jesus!' (Rev 22:20)"⁶

If you think about it, the Eucharist as Christ instituted it supplies the perfect model for the inculturation of the Christian faith. Christ took the ordinary foodstuffs of first-century Palestinians

⁶ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 20.

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and established them as the matter for the bread of life and spiritual drink that should sustain every member of the human race unto salvation. On the one hand, what could be more culturally bound than the ordinary food of a particular people; on the other hand, we know that wheat bread and grape wine enjoy properties that continue to make them amenable to human beings as such, no matter where they may dwell.⁷ Note how we see the particular become and serve the universal without losing its particularity.

The same universality characterizes moral truth. The 2003 encyclical letter restores to our consciousness the ancient teaching that Eucharistic communion and transformed life express the same divine virtue. Charity makes ecclesial communion; charity informs the virtuous person. The proper appreciation of the close relationship that exists between the moral life and the sacrament of the Eucharist constitutes, in my view, one of the casualties of the post-Conciliar period of renewal. Theology teachers, catechists, and others charged with instructing the faithful have failed to communicate to at least two generations of Catholics the fundamental truth that the sacraments and the moral life both flow from the same source. I call this truth “fundamental” inasmuch as the relationship dictates even the structure of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: sacraments in Part Two; moral life in Part Three. One follows the other. Because charity flows from the Eucharist and undergirds the Christian moral life, it is reasonable to expect that those who partake of the Eucharist should exhibit the same virtues. Again, we see the particular, the charity of Christ, become universal, the charity of Christians.

Although we can never make apodictic judgments about anyone’s personal possession of saving grace and therefore of charity, some circumstances nevertheless strike me as odd and irregular. For instance, it is remarkable to observe the dramatic disproportion between the numbers of those who frequent the Sacrament of Reconciliation and those who come forward on any Sunday

⁷ We know that special provisions are made for those who suffer from disabilities, such as celiac disease, a disease in which chronic failure to digest food is triggered by hypersensitivity of the small intestine to gluten.

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morning to receive Holy Communion. Since the Eucharist also grounds Christian moral life, it is wrong for Catholics not to honor the Sacrament with their lives. In other words, built into the mystery of transubstantiation abides the mystery of our personal transformation. As the spiritual authors of an earlier period liked to remark, we are the little hosts, and Jesus remains the big Host.

It is highly significant that the Holy Father inserts at least one of his references to the Eucharist and the moral life within the context of the eschatological tension that the Sacrament generates in the believer. Saint Thomas Aquinas celebrated this tension by referring to the Eucharist as a “pledge (*pignus*) of future glory.”⁸ The sacraments of the new dispensation remain sacraments of faith. The seven sacraments and the virtue of faith create in those who both celebrate and live these mysteries a yearning. The reason for this turns of course on the inescapable truth that while on earth we believers remain wayfarers; only in heaven does sacramental sign give way to reality and faith’s assent to vision. The Eucharist grounds the moral life because it embodies the life of Christian faith. Thus we exclaim at the heart of each Mass, *Mysterium fidei*.

It would not be too expansive a reading of the encyclical to affirm that this papal teaching completes what Pope John Paul II has taught about the transformation of culture. Wherever the Eucharist is celebrated worthily, there already the power of God transforms everything that touches the human, and points this “everything” toward its ultimate *telos* or fulfillment. At the same time, precisely because we are humans on earth, there remains within us a tension, a not-yet, a striving that beckons us to enter again into the sacrifice, proclaiming the death of the Lord “until he comes.” (1 Cor 11:26). The tension results from the fact that we are made for a blessedness that this earth cannot contain. But Christian eschatology does not oblige us to wait until the end times for every manifestation of divine blessedness. God has created an image of the heavenly Jerusalem in the Church of His Son Jesus Christ.

⁸ In an antiphon composed for the Office of Corpus Christi, “O Sacrum convivium.”

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So I tip my hat to those Oblate missionaries of the nineteenth century who by exercising apostleship brought the native people of North America to demonstrate more respect and obedience to what the Council of Trent taught about the forgiveness of sins than may be expected among many professional Church people of our period. They established the Church on the North American continent. At the same time, I pray that on the occasion of the *twentieth* anniversary of *Veritatis splendor* the report from the United States, which after all still exercises enormous influence in the shaping of world culture, will bring more encouraging news. I am confident that it will because the evangelization of culture remains God's work, and He will not fail to inspire in our day worthy agents who will once again take up the task of forming worthy disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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