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Life and Family as Themes in Catholic Social Thought

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1. Introduction

Shortly after the inauguration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the Holy Father addressed a group assembled in Rome to commemorate the fifth anniversary of his Encyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae*. In this discourse (*L'Osservatore Romano* N. 8 [23 February 2000]), he asserted that the message of *Evangelium vitae* provides not only true and authentic guidelines for moral rebirth, but also a “reference point for civil salvation.” The expression “civil salvation” intrigues the theologian whose texts accustom him or her to distinguish between the sacred and the profane, the City of God and the City of Man, nature and grace, Church and State.¹

The Pope goes on to stress the urgency that he attaches to attaining “civil salvation:” “Thus, there is no reason for that type of defeatist mentality which claims that laws opposed to the right to life – those which legalize abortion, euthanasia, sterilization and methods of family planning opposed to life and the dignity of marriage – are inevitable and now almost a social reality” (no. 3). This papal admonition follows what is taught in *Gaudium et spes*, no. 36 (cited in *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 22): “Without the Creator the creature would disappear.... But when God is forgotten the creature itself grows unintelligible.” As his biographer suggests, John Paul II unfailingly embodies a reliable witness to hope. But what are we to make of the Pope's plea to enact a sort of civil salvation? “Civil salvation” describes, so it seems, an ordering of human life

¹ See for example, the 2002 “Doctrinal Note on some questions regarding the participation of Catholics in political life” issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where as a young theologian Prof. Dr Leo Elders, SVD, worked for the Holy See.

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in conformity with Eternal Law, which I sometimes translate as “how God knows the world to be.”² In its fullest and most determined exposition, “civil salvation” would entail the realized redemption of the human community in its various instantiations. So the Holy Father understandably encourages Pastors, Christians, and all persons of good will to look at the “heart of the tragedy.” He wants Christians to build a new culture of life, and to commit ourselves to “change unjust laws that legitimize or tolerate such violence” as comes from abortion, euthanasia, sterilization and the sterilization of the mating act.³ The entire post-conciliar Magisterium of Pope John Paul II proceeds on the assumption that there exists a crisis of culture, and at the same time the Pope witnesses again and again to the consoling good news that the Church, expert in humanity, possesses the resources to meet this crisis that threatens to destroy humankind.

In a separate address to the Sixth General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life, Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, Secretary for Relations with States, gave an account of the

² For further discussion of this point, see chapter two of my *Introduction to Moral Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), which Father Elders has kindly reviewed.

³ Compare what is said in *Evangelium Vitae*: “We have to go to the heart of the tragedy being experienced by modern man: *the eclipse of the sense of God and of man*, typical of a social and cultural climate dominated by secularism, which, with its ubiquitous tentacles, succeeds at time in putting Christian communities themselves to the test. Those who allow themselves to be influenced by this climate easily fall into a sad vicious circle: *when the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man*, of his dignity and his life; in turn, the systematic violation of the moral law, especially, in the serious matter of respect for human life and its dignity, produces a kind of progressive darkening of the capacity to discern God’s living and saving presence” (21).

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defense of life in the context of international policies and norms.⁴ The speech offers, as it were, a “State of the Union” address regarding “civil salvation.” After an examination of trends that have emerged both at the international conferences of Cairo and Beijing and in the political activities of international agencies and bodies, especially, though not exclusively, those of the United Nations, the Archbishop reports on normative juridical texts at the international level that affect the major themes of *Evangelium vitae*: the right to life and abortion, experimentation on embryos, the human genome and cloning, questions about patenting human life, the death penalty, euthanasia. All in all, the Archbishop appraises the present circumstances as exhibiting a “checkered and uneven picture.” It is true that the life of persons already born is well protected, even, at least till now, against their own wills, and there does exist a general retreat from imposing the death penalty. However, unborn human life, whether zygote, morula, embryo, or fetus, is sacrificed to the interests of an already born person. Further, the interests of scientific research tend to prevail over respect for unborn life, though some fixed limits have been set, for instance, the rejection of cloning for reproductive (though not therapeutic) purposes and, in Europe at least, the rejection of the production of embryos for research purposes. It is useful to recall that these remarks originate from the Secretariat of State, and so reflect not only the Church’s Magisterium but also the Holy See’s legitimate participation in the governance of the international community.

2. Theology and Public Life

The present *Festschrift* honors a priest-theologian who has devoted his life to putting Christian faith and human reason together at the service of Church and world. Dr Elders eminently displays the kind of service that a theologian who thinks with the Church can render to

⁴ See “The Defense of Life in the Context of International Policies and Norms” in *L’Osservatore Romano* N. 8 (23 February 2000): 6-8.

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men of good will. As the professional designation suggests, the “theo-logian” is concerned with a word about God. A Dominican mentor once offered me a simple definition of theology; he said that doing theology amounts to “thinking about the faith.” In his thirteenth encyclical, *Fides et ratio*, Pope John Paul II taught that this “thinking” proceeds in two moments: first, an “*auditus fidei*” and secondly, an “*intellectus fidei*.” “With the first,” the Pope explains, “theology makes its own the content of revelation as this has been gradually expounded in sacred tradition, sacred Scripture and the church’s living Magisterium (see *Dei Verbum*, no. 10). With the second, theology seeks to respond through speculative inquiry to the specific demands of disciplined thought” (no. 65). The theologian can only develop a properly theological science by accepting the “content of revelation,” namely that which has been handed over to the Church in Tradition and Scripture and safeguarded by the Magisterium. For this reason, strictly theological arguments as such are excluded from our public discourse, at least in a non-confessional state.⁵

Of course, Catholics are able to appeal to the common ground that exists between the legitimate objectives of the state and the authentic interests of the Church, e.g., helping the underprivileged, but they cannot argue that divorce should be excluded from the political order on the grounds that marriage images the permanent and indissoluble union of Christ with the Church. Or, to give another example, that the gracious and universal call to beatific fellowship with the Blessed Trinity determines whether or not to allow prayers in public schools. For us, then, to achieve “civil salvation” requires appeal to other than theological arguments in the strict sense, that is, those that proceed from revealed and non-demonstrable premises.

⁵ On the other hand, as Avery Dulles elsewhere has reminded us, since a confessional state is not excluded by the principles of “*Dignitatis Humanae*,” it would be possible to envisage a political order that admitted theological truth, that is, revealed truth, into its official public discourse. See his “Criteria of Catholic Theology,” *Communio* 22.2 (1995): 303-15.

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One should not conclude from this understanding of theology that the theologian has nothing worthwhile to say in the public forum or that the theologian's mandate extends only to purely private matters of personal faith. At the same time, given our present political circumstances, the theologian *qua* theologian should not be expected to provide a strategy for planning and executing public discourse. To determine which course of action is opportune, or even permitted, before courts or legislatures falls to those trained in judicial and legislative practices, to jurists and lawmakers, not theologians. But the theologian can communicate divine truth to those on whom it falls to carry out this mediation. The theologian can promote a public moral order based on natural and divine law, even when civil institutions in large measure, operate within a framework of legal positivism.⁶ How else can we answer the Pope's appeal to construct "civil salvation"? Moreover, if such a mediation were not possible, it would be difficult to explain why there exists such a thing as Catholic Social Thought, unless it were just politics done by Catholics, and preferably by Catholics who demonstrate outwardly their piety.

In what follows, I will point out three areas where, in my judgment, Catholic teaching on human life and family unity provides a special assistance to the construction of "civil salvation."

I hope to identify theological arguments—an exercise in what the Pope calls the "*intellectus fidei*"—that can help those who want to enact "civil salvation." Before proceeding to consider them, however, it is useful to recall a distinction that the scholastic theologians had posited between what is supernatural in itself, "*supernaturale quoad substantiam*," and what is

⁶ For example, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's "Doctrinal Note": "The social doctrine of the Church is not an intrusion into the government of individual countries.... 'There cannot be two parallel lives in their existence: on the one hand, the so-called "spiritual life," with its values and demand; and on the other, the so-called "secular life", that is, life in a family, at work, in social responsibilities, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture....'" (no. 6, citing John Paul II Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, no. 59).

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supernatural in the way that it is communicated, “supernaturale quoad modum.”⁷ The first category of truths embraces those things that we know only because they have been communicated to the human race through divine revelation, whereas the second category includes those truths which in themselves remain knowable to human reason, but which, for purposes of the divine pedagogy, have also been revealed in the Church of faith and sacraments. The distinction still holds good. The Munich philosopher Robert Spaemann has written that contrary to a now widespread prejudice, the existence of God, the immortality of the human soul, and the divine judgement which determines our eternal destiny are not merely dogmas of Christian faith or of religions of biblical origins, but they are age-old insights of philosophy.⁸ Pope John Paul glosses this assertion when he writes in *Evangelium vitae*: “Revelation progressively allows the first notion of immortal life planted by the Creator in the human heart to be grasped with ever greater clarity” (no. 31). It is imperative to recall that when the Church instructs about the good of human life, she enunciates truths that are not foreign and strange to human beings. Recall the clear teaching of *Veritatis splendor*, namely, that nature—to borrow a colorful image from Russell Hittinger—“does not speak with a forked tongue.”⁹ The promise is not that grace will make nature different, but that grace perfects nature.

⁷ The sixteenth-century Thomist commentator Thomas De Vio Cajetan (1469-1534) records the distinction in his commentary on the *Summa theologiae*. For further discussion, see my *Christian Faith and the Theological Life* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), p. 80, n80.

⁸ Robert Spaemann, “The Anthropology of *Evangelium vitae*,” discourse delivered on 14 February 2000 before the 6th General Assembly, “*Evangelium vitae*: 5 Years of Difficult Confrontation with the Society,” of the Pontifical Academy for Life (Rome).

⁹ For Hittinger’s extended remarks on this theme, see his *A Critique of the New Natural Law Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).

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3. Three instances where truths held by divine and Catholic faith strengthen legal and political discourse

To illustrate this way of looking at the role that theology can play in public discourse, I have chosen three current issues that deal respectively with the beginning of life, the formative period in human life, and the end of life. This essay could have been titled, “NIH, Elián Gonzalez, and the Hemlock Society.” Other examples of course could have been chosen.

(i) First, the use of the human genetic patrimony and human cloning. The human genome project offers ample possibilities to substitute the good of expedience for the goods of excellence.¹⁰ When the temptation is not resisted, biotechnological research threatens to erode the created order in unimaginable ways. Notwithstanding the likelihood that many fellow citizens will judge the harm done to human individuals as examples of spectacular progress, one discovers in this rapidly developing field immediate implications that threaten the political, economic, and military realms. The details of scientific explorations associated with the genome project are of great complexity, and it is not my purpose to consider specific aspects of the

¹⁰ On 12 March 2000, the Holy Father included in his list of petitions for forgiveness the following spoken by Archbishop Francois Xavier Nguy An Van Thun: “Let us pray for all the men and women of the world, especially for minors who are victims of abuse, for the poor, the alienated, the disadvantaged; let us pray for those who are most defenseless, the unborn killed in their mother’s womb or *even exploited for experimental purposes by those who abuse the promise of biotechnology and distort the aims of science*” (emphasis added). After a moment of silence, the Holy Father then prayed: “God, our Father, you always hear the cry of the poor. How many times have Christians themselves not recognized you in the hungry, the thirsty and the naked, in the persecuted, the imprisoned, and in those incapable of defending themselves, especially in the first stages of life. For all those who have committed acts of injustice by trusting in wealth and power and showing contempt for the ‘little ones’ who are so dear to you, we ask your forgiveness: have mercy on us and accept our repentance. We ask this through Christ our Lord. R. Amen. R. Kyrie, eleison; Kyrie, eleison; Kyrie, eleison.”

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research.¹¹ (Such discussion would be of limited value in any case because of the rapid developments in the field, e.g., the new cloning of pigs for human organs.) Suffice it to remark that during the preparation of the *Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights* (adopted by the United Nations in December 1998), the Holy See found it necessary both to point out the threat to and to insist on the protection of each individual human being.

Embryonic stem cell research affords a good example of where the concerns of the Holy See are both justified and urgent.¹² As was reported in the popular Jesuit monthly *America*, there are few ethicists, religious or secular, who oppose stem cell research in itself. Indeed, it is generally agreed that there exists “enormous therapeutic promise” in stem cells. At the moment, the troublesome moral question turns on the source of the stem cells. It is true, some arguments against stem cell research have focused on the unknowable and possibly horrendous effects of these experiments. For example, one team of researchers acknowledged, bluntly, that if the combining of human and animal genetic material would produce a monster, they would immediately destroy the organism instead of letting it live.¹³ Along this same line, the Holy See

¹¹ For summary explanations, see “Notes on Moral Theology” in *Theological Studies* (March 2000) and the more popular account in *U.S. Catholic* (January 2000). For a more developed exposition of the scientific data, see Leroy Walters’ very clear book on genetic engineering, *The Ethics of Human Gene Therapy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). See also, *Controlling Our Destinies: Historical, Ethical, and Theological Perspectives on the Human Genome Project*, ed. Phillip R. Sloan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000). For the perspective of a particular theological tradition, see Gilbert Meilander, “Begetting and Cloning” in *Ethical Issues in Human Cloning*, ed. Michael C. Brannigan (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000).

¹² See The Bulletin of the NCBC on Moral Issues in the Health and Life Sciences, *Ethics & Medics*, (March 2000) Volume 25, no. 3.

¹³ One method of experimentation involves combining human genetic material with that of animals. Father Daniel Becker coined the phrase “Man-Cow Experiment” to emphasize the

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has expressed its concern about the patenting of human life, especially, patenting procedures for modifying the foundational genetic identity of human beings. But the most serious issue that confronts us is not where stem cell research may lead, but whence the source of the stem cells, since the use of embryonic stem cells necessitates the destruction of human embryos.¹⁴

Why protect individual human life even at its earliest stages? What claim can be made to protect the integrity of four or eight rapidly dividing cells? Consider what the Church holds by divine and Catholic faith about the constitution of the human creature. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it this way: “The unity of the soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the ‘form’ of the body: i.e., it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature” (CCC 365). Since the soul is the *forma corporis*, parents cannot generate a soul-less body. What would make it a body? And since Catholic teaching holds that the human soul is created immediately by God, each human being stands in a relationship of immediacy to God, which is the foundation of the human person’s dignity. At this point, one might observe that the soul gives the body the architecture that it has, and it does this so that the human being can do what human beings by divine design are made to do. The neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain spoke about a “blossoming of my being in the flower of all that is.”¹⁵ He of course points to the contemplative vocation that alone perfects each human being, not just philosophers. In any event, the form of the body means that the

distortions of the “research” being conducted in the Worcester Diocese. See *America* (October 16 1999), “The Stem Cell Report.”

¹⁴ The National Catholic Bioethics Center has recently brought to our attention promising research on adult stem cells. For report and bibliography, see *Ethics & Medics*, March 2000.

¹⁵ For discussion of this citation, see Pierre-Marie Emonet, *The Greatest Marvel of Nature*, trans. Robert R. Barr (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000), p. 6.

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organization of every personal capacity depends on what the soul does to the body, and it does this from the very beginning, or else there would not be a body.¹⁶

Because of their “totipotency,” that is, their reputed ability to form all tissue types, there is an actual preference for those cells produced by division immediately after fertilization. The prohibition on obtaining stem cells from embryos extends even to the zygote. To allow the zygote to be put at our disposal for achieving heretofore unimagined benefits for humanity still instrumentalizes one human being in favor of another or others. The philosopher can provide arguments against harming early human life. For example, in his recently published introduction to phenomenology, Monsignor Sokolowski offers a compelling argument that the “early self is already something of a player in the game of truth”¹⁷ The theologian, whose license obliges recourse to divine revelation, must, in my view, introduce the human “soul” into any discussion about what researchers can or cannot do with the fruit of the union of man and woman. His foundational text is what *Gaudium et spes* 14 teaches about the constitution of the human person: “Man, though made of body and soul, is a unity” (14.1).

¹⁶ Two works by Dominican authors deserve special mention not only for their presentation of a non-transcendentalist anthropology, but also because their work has received so little notice by Catholic theorists: William A. Wallace, *The Modelling of Nature. Philosophy of Science and Philosophy of Nature in Synthesis* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), esp., chap. 5, “Human Nature,” and Benedict Ashley, O.P., *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian* (Braintree, MA: The Pope John Center, 1995).

¹⁷ See his *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 121. Also see Paul Ricoeur, *Onself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), esp. “Personal Identity and Narrative Identity.”

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To dissect for whatsoever purpose this *per se unum*¹⁸, whose ultimate destiny is to praise the God who created it, constitutes an *ultra vires* exercise of human authority. Even the four or eight cells that make up the zygote already possess a principle of constitution.¹⁹ Russell Hittinger has argued that the origins for this ethical and political audacity lies in the Enlightenment's rejection of participated theonomy in favor of radical autonomy. "The request for dominion rather than covenantal participation, along with the illusion that God is an absentee landlord, is the oldest story on the books." Like the wicked tenants in the Gospel parable, unredeemed man want to take over the farm. But God has not bequeathed the farm to us. To allow the killing of embryos is to promote the illusion of possessing an absolute jurisdictional authority that God simply has not communicated to any human person or the human race, still less to the Washington-based National Institute of Health.²⁰

¹⁸ *Gaudium et spes*, no.14: "Corpore et anima unus, homo per ipsam suam corporalem condicionem elementa mundi materialis in se colligit, ita ut, per ipsum, fastigium suum attingant et ad liberam creatoris laudem vocem attolant (see Deut 3, 57-90).

¹⁹ The Christian believer rejects the exercise of plenary authority over other human beings, even in the earliest stages of their development, because he or she not only shuns the unwarranted abrogation of divine authority that it represents, but because divine and Catholic faith obliges us to respect human life from the moment of conception. *Evangelium vitae* makes this explicit: "This evaluation of the morality of abortion is to be applied also to the recent forms of *intervention on human embryos*. . . ." (see *Evangelium Vitae* 63). See Benedict M. Ashley, O.P. and Kevin D. O'Rourke, O.P., *Health Care Ethics*, 4th edition (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1997): 232, 234, for a reasoned response to the argument advanced by some that the recognized phenomenon of twinning provides an approximately two-week free zone to treat the zygote as something that has not yet achieved its full human status.

²⁰ See his "Law and Liberty in *Veritatis splendor*," *The Splendor of Truth and Health Care*, Proceedings of the Fourteenth Workshop for Bishops, ed. Russell E. Smith (Braintree, MA: The Pope John XXIII Medical-Moral Research and Education Center, 1995), p. 37. Not only Catholic thinkers recognize the ontological capriciousness that can take hold of biotechnological research. Monette Vacquin, a French psychoanalyst, describes the "illusions" of certain present-day tendencies. See her *Main basse sur les vivantes* (Paris, 1999).

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(ii) The circumstances that surround the second sample case are better to known to many in the United States than the scientific givens about the human genome project. They surround the story of the young Cuban boy Elián Gonzalez, who was rescued from the sea after a failed attempt to emigrate from Cuba during which his mother Elizabet perished. Once settled with relatives in Miami, Elián was free to participate in the social life of the Cuban community in that city. Some interested parties mounted arguments (accompanied by public protests) to keep the boy in the United States, whereas his natural father, who had not emigrated with mother and son, wanted Elián returned to Cuba. The moral circumstances of the case of course require some attention to the complex political exchanges between Castro's Cuba and official spokespersons of United States foreign policy.

Can Catholic social thought teach anything about where Elián Gonzalez should live? What is "civil salvation" for Elián? On the assumption that the child's father is willing and capable of caring properly for his offspring, I would argue that both the natural law and the truths of Catholic and divine faith allow only one resolution.²¹ The only just course of action is to return Elián to his birth father. Again, the theologian looks at the *documenta fidei*, the documents of faith. Both the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2199) and the teaching of *Familiaris Consortio* suppose that minor children live out their Christian vocations within the family, "the original cell of social life."²² It is further held that father and mother are the most universal, i.e., necessary, relationships, and so the traditional natural law teaching that "a father

²¹ Laura Meckler of the Associated Press reported on 2 April 2000 that the Miami-based relatives of Elián Gonzalez had pressed the charge that the boy's father was unfit to carry out his parental obligations, but the United States government replied that there was no evidence to support this allegation.

²² See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2207. Also, "The fourth commandment is addressed expressly to children in their relationship to their father and mother, because this relationship is the most universal" (CCC 2199).

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naturally loves his son more because he is closer to him; but a son naturally loves his father more as representing a higher good.” The citation is from Aquinas, and comes from his treatise on charity in the *secunda-secundae* of the *Summa theologiae*.²³ He is talking about the priorities that exist in the civilization of love. When this doctrine is applied to the case of Elián, it sustains the view that the child needs to love the person who embodies—objectively, not appreciatively—a higher good than can be supplied by other relatives.

If there is a theological argument that Elián belongs with his father, it is so that Elián can embrace a particular good end of human flourishing, an “end” that the Church has judged to be indispensable for the good of the human person. Namely, to love and learn from a father. Further, it is to be supposed that this good is so close to nature that without achieving it, the child will suffer in a way that no amount of other “goods” can compensate. Surely not the goods of the consumer society, e.g., repeated trips to Disney Land. The *Catechism* adds to the description of this indispensable good by speaking about “affinity.” The text runs: “The relationships within the family bring an affinity of feelings, affections and interests, arising above all from the members respect for one another” (2206). Without this unique kind of “affinity” something is lacking in the family, and in the family’s children especially.²⁴

In the Catholic tradition, freedom remains an intermediate good that cannot be used to trump a basic structure or relation of the natural law itself. One does not have to be a Christian to argue that observance of the Fourth Commandment and the exercise of filial piety supercede whatever claims can be advanced on the basis of political freedoms accorded to refugees or even

²³ See *Summa Theologiae* IIa-IIae q.26 a. 9, ad 2.

²⁴ It may be appropriate to note in this regard that in early March 2000, a six year-old boy abandoned to the care of an uncle, murdered a six-year old classmate in a suburban American school.

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citizens.²⁵ Informed sources assure me that preference for placing children with natural parents still shapes the practices of our courts and governmental agencies. While the former United States Attorney General Janet Reno took the right side of this debate, the theologian sees in a more complete way the good that government still protects. The Catholic believer is able to recognize in filial piety the natural foundation for the exercise of the Christian religion. In addition to responding to the natural law questions, the theologian must consider seriously the question, “Who will teach Elián to say ‘Our Father’?”

The Catholic participant in this exchange will want to ensure that the Pastors of the Church in Cuba are free to provide pastoral care for Elián. Were they unable to provide pastoral care, the resolution of the Elián case would require still further consideration. But even if the question became: should the Church take children from their parents for the sake of a better religion, the answer would be no, and for the same reasons why the Church should not use kidnaping of adults as a means of conversion. Freedom is necessary for belief, and a child of Elián’s age must be considered to be guided by the freedom of his or her parents, provided of course that the one of them is alive and capable of making a free and reasoned judgment.

Catholic Social Thought illumines the concrete case of Elián Gonzalez, and is able to prescribe a prudential course of action that should be followed in the particular, and admittedly tragically complex, circumstances that surrounded Elián’s departure from Cuba and arrival in the United States. To affirm that freedom of any kind (with the possible exception of religion, though in the present example it had been determined that the Archbishop of Havana is able to

²⁵ Although the editorial, “Send the Boy Home to Cuba,” that appeared in *America* (March 11, 2000) reaches the same conclusion concerning the right course of action, it evaluates the case almost exclusively on the basis of the political circumstances, and so appeals at best only implicitly to the natural law argument.

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provide pastoral care for Elián) can trump natural law would lead to impossible reversals of the moral life.²⁶ Consider the prospects of children removed from the care of their parents on the basis that the children were not provided with freedom to learn about the benefits of artificial contraception or about the suitability of same sex unions. Some have argued that the American regime is corrupt on the basis of its failure to protect unborn human life. Without passing judgment on the legitimacy of governmental institutions, Pope John Paul II has urged that “no effort should be spared to eliminate legalized crime or at least to limit the damage caused by these laws.”²⁷ It is difficult to imagine how the United States government could have decided against the interests of the natural father in the case of Elián, but were this to have happened, then the Catholic believer would have recognized in such an outcome a pyrrhic victory for human rights, and another failure of nerve in the effort to construct “civil salvation.” Given the boy’s age, only the natural father can accomplish the true good for the person of Elián Gonzalez.

(iii) The third instance where truths held by divine and Catholic faith can strengthen the social order deals with the growing acceptance of euthanasia. “Growing acceptance” may be understatement. Earlier this month, the Paris newspapers reported that “Le Comité consultatif national d’éthique” (CCNE) made public its view: “Une sorte d’exception d’euthanasie pourrait

²⁶ Bernard Cardinal Law defended this view in an editorial that appeared in *The Boston Globe* (Wednesday 19 April 2000), “End the circus; let Elian rejoin his father.” On 28 June 2000, the Supreme Court rejected an appeal lodged by the boy’s Miami relatives to extend Elián’s stay in the United States and to give him an asylum hearing; later on the same day, Elián and his father boarded a charter jet to Cuba.

²⁷ Address on Monday, 14 February 2000 to those taking part in a commemoration of the fifth anniversary of the encyclical *Evangelium vitae* (*L’Osservatore Romano* N. 8 [23 February 2000]).

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être prévue par la loi.”²⁸ It is not my intention to rehearse the Church’s insistence that there exists a radical duty to respect every human being’s life from conception to natural death, including the life of the lowliest and the least gifted. *Evangelium vitae* sets these arguments forth and concludes with the Pope’s confirmation of the moral truth that “euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person” (no. 65). At the same time, it is somewhat alarming to observe that so many religious persons are persuaded that the right to die is among the last rights to be delivered over to the autonomous, choosing self. Recall that the moral tradition argues against suicide of any kind by appeal to the most basic inclination or norm of natural law, namely that which the human person shares with every living being. It is regrettable that moral theologies that stress culpability to the exclusion of the good of the human person have diminished our collective appreciation of the horror that taking one’s own life entails.

Arguments for euthanasia and assisted suicide persuade most readily those who have nothing constructive to posit about human suffering. I do not know whether there is a body of philosophical literature on the good of suffering. The Italian adage, “Live well, and you won’t experience displeasure,” probably captures the most profound human sentiments on the matter. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that neither “philosophy” nor “philosopher” appear in Pope John Paul II’s “On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering,” *Salvifici Doloris* (11 February 1984). In any event, one thing is sure. The central message of the Christian religion reveals the redemptive character of suffering. Let me quote one text from *Salvifici Doloris*, no.19:

One can say that with the passion of Christ all human suffering has found itself in a new situation. And it is as though Job had foreseen this when he said: "I know that my Redeemer lives...,"(Jb 19:25) and as though he had directed towards it his

²⁸ See the report “*L’Euthanasie, Dans Certain Cas...*” in *Liberation* (Vendredi, 3 Mars 2000): 16.

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own suffering, which without the Redemption could not have revealed to him the fullness of its meaning. In the cross of Christ not only is the Redemption accomplished through suffering, but also human suffering itself has been redeemed.

Because Christian faith teaches that “all human suffering has found itself in a new situation,” we find ourselves in a better position to provide end-of-life health care that conduces to waiting for natural death. Recall that the Christian spiritual tradition includes instructions on how to prepare for a happy death. This is the case because dying well forms part of the virtuous life.

The theologian can elaborate further on the soteriological significance of the new situation that Christ’s own sufferings and death bring to the suffering and dying human person: In a word, Christian satisfaction stands at the heart of the redemptive action.²⁹ But to keep to our present purposes, it is imperative for believers to understand that since Christ’s resurrection human suffering does not return the human person to the predicament of Job. Christ by his own death on the cross has redeemed all human suffering, including the final suffering that accompanies the separation of the soul from the body. The Dominican anthropologist Norbert Luyten was accustomed to point out the root basis for the suffering of death. Death brings suffering precisely because of the “per se unum” that is the human person. Separation doesn’t come easy. Sometimes theologians speak as if death were simply a passage from one kind of freedom, limited and circumscribed, to another endless freedom. They forget about the *forma corporis*. On the one hand there is the natural upliftedness of the soul – its immortality, if you will – but on the other, there is the unity of soul and body which explains why the organism struggles to retain its *forma*.

²⁹ See my *The Godly Image: Christian satisfaction from Anselm to Aquinas*. Petersham, MA: Saint Bede’s Books, 1990), which appeared originally as *Christian Satisfaction in Aquinas* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982).

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The theologian knows that the end of life is not a wasted moment. Indeed it is a time of salvation, and no one should want to shorten it for any reason, even though palliative care remains a good. One may debate the administration of pain killers that results in impairment of consciousness. But there can be no debate about the redemptive meaning of suffering, whether the dying person is conscious or not. This tenet of Catholic faith illuminates another aspect of “civil salvation.” It is not achieved when the dying are murdered.

4. Conclusion

These examples serve to illustrate how Catholic doctrine can shape social thought. To tell the truth, it is difficult to separate ethics from politics. Jean-Louis Brugès has remarked on the irony that while in 1789 the young French Republic adopted a devise incorporating ethical standards, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, the new political regime perverted the first two ideals (freedom quickly evolved into public liberties, while equality generated despotism and, later, *realpolitik*) and destroyed the third (in 1793 with the execution of the French King Louis XVI). The same unfortunate reversal arguably occurs two centuries later. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the new political order announced the apotheosis of democratic government: the “magic triangle” (to borrow the phrase of Pierre Hassner) of democracy, responsibility, and human rights. But these plainly political and juridical institutions, as is clear from our own circumstances, have become the very instruments used to create the crisis of culture and to perpetuate ethical illusion instead of sound government: e.g., national ethics committees, an exaggerated sense of responsibility, and human rights placed under the constraint of public

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opinion.³⁰ Well does the Pope remind us: “When the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man” (*Evangelium vitae*, no. 21).

We have no choice, then, but to anticipate the Kingdom of God. Respect for life and family as the Church teaches us to pursue it is not a sectarian enterprise. The “strife” -- to borrow an expression of Father Richard John Neuhaus -- is about Eternal Law, not the moral values of a particular religious tradition. That’s why the Pope says that *Evangelium vitae* must guide the construction of “civil salvation.” He knows that the truths of divine and Catholic faith are meant for everyone.

Not everything is dark and ominous, however. Christ has already changed the way that people think about God. In the 70s, the late French Dominican A.-J. Festugière observed on the novelty that Christian revelation introduced: “Even though one may be as unhappy as before, and though there may have been as many crimes and sufferings in the year 1972 as in the time of Tiberius or Nero, an extraordinary phenomenon took place during the first century of our era: man came to believe that God loved him.”³¹ Only the theologian can announce this truth. And it remains the central truth that undergirds Catholic Social Thought. To this same saving truth, Leo Elders has dedicated fifty years of priestly devotion. Vivat!

³⁰ “L’éthique d’abord? Ou les incertitudes du politique,” Discours du Prof. Jean Louis Brugès o.p. lors du Dies academicus du 15 novembre 1999, published in *Pierre d’Angle* 6 (2000). For a more extended treatment of this issue, see Martin Rhonheimer, “Fundamental Rights, Moral Law, and the Legal Defense of Life in a Constitutional Democracy” *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 43 (1998): 135-183.

³¹ *Mémorial André-Jean Festugière. Antiquité païenne et chrétienne, Vingt-cinq études publiées et réunies par E. Lucchesi et H.-D. Saffrey, Cahiers d’orientalisme X*, éditions P. Cramer, Genève, 1984, p. 275.