

Liberal Societies and the Foundations of Human Dignity: The Dramatic Nature of Human Action

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ABSTRACT

The argument turns on the claim that the human person is constitutively related to God and others and as such bears a profound interiority and passion that imbue his freedom with a dramatic form. It is the constitutive relation to God and others that grounds human dignity and its call for authentic rights, and only a freedom filled with interiority and passion stemming from a memory of God will have the capacity in the end properly to recognize the dignity and rights of all, including the weakest. Thus, taking as its point of departure *Evangelium Vitae*'s teaching that two salient aspects of the culture of death are a self-centered notion of freedom and the "eclipse of the sense of God and of man," the paper proposes that liberal democracy, even on its best reading, is unable to secure universal human dignity and rights because it understands persons and freedom in an ontologically self-centered way.

HUMAN ACTION REALIZES its integrity only insofar as it is dramatic, and it is truly dramatic in the end only insofar as it comes to terms with its creaturely nature before God. This I believe is the burden of the thought of Pope John Paul II. *Evangelium Vitae* speaks of a struggle in our time between good and evil, between a "culture of life" and a "culture of death" (EV §28). Such a struggle would surely seem to suggest a drama. My proposal, however, is that, though there is much movement and much noise and sometimes great violence in democratic societies today, there is virtually no drama, and that it is just the absence of drama that highlights the nature of the drift of liberal societies toward a culture of death.

I

First, some brief etymological notes. “Drama,” from the Greek, means literally “deed” or “act.” But the term refers more commonly to a life or theatrical performance involving tension and conflict that stirs the imagination and evokes the passions. These two meanings cannot be cleanly separated. We are not disposed really to count as a human action one that is bereft of passion or lacking in dynamic quality and depth.

The term “passion” comes from the Latin *patior*, “to suffer, undergo, or experience,” and in turn from the Greek *πάσχω*, “to receive an impression from without,” “to suffer” (as opposed to doing) something. The term “interior” comes from the Latin *interior*, which means “inner,” and can also mean “from the depth” of something.

It is passion and interior power, then, that enable human action to be truly dramatic. But what is it, concretely, that gives passion and interior power their substantive content?

To be a creature is, *eo ipso*, to bear a relation to God that “demands” and presupposes a “space” inside what is deepest and most original in the creature, one that reaches from within the roots of the creature outward. Human action is a matter of *passion* because at its root it remains an *undergoing* of this relation to God that is originally or anteriorly *given*. Human action is a matter of interior power for the same reason. It is above all an enactment of a relation that comes *from within*, a relation that, in the words of St. Augustine, is more deeply interior to us than we are to ourselves and that reaches toward the highest heights, infinitely beyond us.¹ Passion and interiority, in short, disclose the deepest depths of what characterizes our creaturely openness to the infinite. They indicate the human receptive capacity for relation to God.

In the summary words of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of*

¹ God is “more inward than my inmost self [*intimior intimo meo*] and higher than my topmost height” (Augustine, *Confessions* III.6). In the words of Aquinas, “God is in all things, and innermost [*intime* (*magis intimum*)]” (*Summa theologiae* I.8.1). Further, Aquinas says that “all cognitive beings know God implicitly [*implicite*] in whatever they know” and naturally tend implicitly to God in every end they seek or desire, thereby affirming Augustine’s statement that “whatever can love, loves God [*Deum diligit quidquid diligere potest*]” (*De Veritate* 22 ad 2).

the Church, “the essence and existence of man are constitutively related to God....” This relationship “is not something that comes afterwards and is not added from the outside. The whole of man’s life is a quest and a search for God.... [M]an of his inmost nature is a capacity for God (*‘homo est Dei capax’*).”²

All that I have to say regarding the nature of human action as drama follows from this understanding of the creature as *capax Dei et alterius*, and from the fact that this creaturely capacity “can be ignored or even forgotten or dismissed, but...never...eliminated.”³ In relation to it, therefore, no act of intelligence or freedom can even for a moment remain neutral. My intention is to comment on what this means and why it takes us to the heart of the problem of the opposition between a culture of life and a culture of death in democratic societies as announced by *Evangelium vitae*.

We begin, then, with a brief look at this encyclical’s account of the drift in democratic societies toward a culture of death by focusing on the root causes of this drift.

II

The first chapter of the encyclical is devoted to an analysis of the lights and shadows of the current cultural situation as it bears on human life. There are many initiatives that serve as signs of hope. Democracy today, however, insofar as it is linked with relativism, threatens to turn its intended defense of “rights” on its head, paradoxically becoming a kind of totalitarian freedom of “the strong over the weak” (§19-20).

The encyclical identifies two problematic tendencies at the source of the inversion of rights indicated here. First, there is a self-centered concept of freedom (§13) that is characterized in various ways: a false concept of subjectivity that “recognizes as a subject of rights only the person who enjoys full or at least incipient autonomy and who emerges from a state of total dependence on others” (§19); a tendency to equate “dignity with

² *Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church* §109, hereafter CSDC. On the nature of spirit (personal being) as the capacity for relation, cf. Josef Pieper, “The Philosophical Act,” in *Leisure the Basis of Culture* (New York: Mentor, 1963).

³ CSDC §109.

capacity for verbal and explicit, or at least perceptible, communication” (§19), with a consequent loss of a “place in the world for anyone who, like the unborn and the dying..., can only communicate through the silent language of a profound sharing of affection” (§19); in a word, a failure to understand that “freedom possesses an inherently relational dimension [*quae essentialem necessitudinis rationem secum fert*]” and an “essential link with the truth [*constitutivum veritatis vinculum*]” (§19).⁴

Along with this defective concept of freedom, the problem that threatens us even more profoundly is “the eclipse of the sense of God and of man” (§21). The encyclical quotes from *Gaudium et spes* §36: “When God is forgotten, the creature itself grows unintelligible” (§21). The result of this forgetfulness is that man “no longer grasps the ‘transcendent’ character of his ‘existence as man.’ He no longer considers life as a splendid gift of God... Life itself becomes a mere ‘thing,’ which man claims as his exclusive property, completely subject to his control and manipulation” (§21). Man “is concerned only with ‘doing’ [*faciundi*] and using all kinds of technology [*ad omnes artes se conferens*], he busies himself with programming, controlling and dominating birth and death. Birth and death, instead of being primary experiences demanding to be ‘lived’ [*agantur*] become things to be merely ‘possessed’ or ‘rejected’” (§22). “Nature itself, far from being *mater* (mother), is now reduced to being ‘matter’ and is subjected to every kind of manipulation,” in accord with “a certain technical and scientific way of thinking” (§22).

More generally, “the values of being are replaced by those of having” (§23). Suffering is rejected as useless (§23). “The body is...no longer perceived as a properly personal reality, a sign and place of relations with others, with God and with the world. It is simply...a complex of organs, functions and energies to be used according to the sole criteria of pleasure and efficiency” (§23). Thus “the criterion of personal dignity...is replaced by the criterion of efficiency, functionality and usefulness: others are considered not for what they ‘are,’ but for what they ‘have, do and produce.’ This is the supremacy of the strong over the weak” (§23).

⁴ As the Vatican summary (§1) of *Evangelium vitae* puts it: democracy’s peculiar inversion of rights stems from a notion of freedom “which is seen as disconnected from any reference to truth and objective good, and which asserts itself...without the constitutive link of relationship with others.”

Evangelium vitae sums up as follows the response needed in the face of these characteristic tendencies of a culture of death:

It is therefore essential that man should acknowledge his inherent condition as a creature [*originalem perspiciat suae condicionis evidentiam qua creaturae*] to whom God has granted being and life as a gift and a duty [*donum et munus*]. Only by admitting his innate dependence [*innatam dependentiam in propria existentia*] can man live and use his freedom to the full and at the same time respect the life and freedom of every other person [*radicitus*: from his roots].⁵ Here especially one sees that ‘at the heart of every culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God’ [*Centesimus Annus* §24]. Where God is denied and people live ‘as though he did not exist’..., the dignity of the human person and the inviolability of human life also end up being rejected or compromised. (§96).

Now, an important qualifier would seem necessary with respect to the encyclical’s claim here of a link between the patterns characteristic of the culture of death and the absence of freedom’s relation to God, and to others in God. In the U.S., for example, and hence in at least one liberal society (i.e., the Anglo-American), polling evidence continues to exist of extremely high belief in God (as much as 90%), and the disposition of American society to help those in need likewise seems high. And yet abundant—and growing—signs of the culture of death as depicted in *Evangelium vitae* coincide with Americans’ characteristically sincere belief in God and voluntary generosity toward others.

Recalling our opening comments, I wish to suggest that the nature of the qualifier needed to clarify the argument of the encyclical lies in the nature of drama, with its presupposition of passion and interiority. The absence of God that correlates with the culture of death is, in the first instance, a matter not of moral intention but of ontological depth. The problem lies in the *ontological indifference* of liberalism’s concepts of reason and freedom, an indifference expressed in the failure to take account of the *constitutive* nature of man’s relation to God (and to others)

⁵ The freedom proper to creatures is a “freedom given to us as a gift, one to be received like a seed to be cultivated responsibly” (CSDC §138, citing *Veritatis Splendor* §86).

and hence of the implications of creaturely *origin* and *destiny* in and for reason and freedom in each of their acts.

What I am proposing in the name of *Evangelium vitae* is that the real magnitude of the problem confronting us in the growing culture of death in liberal societies comes into view only when and insofar as we see that the absence of God is a phenomenon taking place precisely *within* what can otherwise be granted as a sincere belief in God and concern for social justice on the part of even the majority in some of these societies (at least in America).

Our questions are thus two: What are the key conditions that must be realized to show reason and freedom in their rightful ontological depth? In what way does liberalism typically tend to ignore or deny these conditions?

III

First, our being originates as a gift—it has always *first* been *given* to us by God, and indeed given by others in God. It follows that human action, in its innermost nature and destiny, is—and is meant to become—a *response* to this gift of love that consists in God’s always loving us first, and indeed, in Jesus Christ, in loving us unto a suffering death.⁶ All that needs to be said about the dramatic nature of action derives from this original-constitutive meaning of human life and action as *responsive* to a relation initiated first and sustained by God in Jesus Christ.

Second, this relation to God that is first given by God is meant *to last forever* and calls the creature *to love forever in return*. Thus, Joseph Ratzinger has said that “the world is created in order to provide a setting for the Covenant by which God binds himself to man.” The world “is created, so to say, in accordance with the inner structure of the Covenant..., and the Torah...[already] sets out both the Covenant and the marriage.”⁷ Thus we can say that creaturely freedom realizes its proper subjectivity only as always already objectively bound to God (and to other creatures in God). This objective binding is a binding in love, after the

⁶ Cf. CSDC §39.

⁷ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *God and the World* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 2002), p. 113.

manner of spousal love,⁸ and its “obligatory” nature thus comes in the form of a gift eliciting response, a call that moves by means of attraction. Creaturely freedom in its deepest reality is thus neither indifferent nor arbitrary subjectivity, nor is its objective binding to another a simple imposition from without. This duality–dual unity–of subjective freedom and objective binding to another takes its meaning from the love by which the Creator God always first loves us, and this love is meant–in mutual if radically asymmetrical ways on the Creator’s side and the creature’s side–to bind forever.

In a word, creaturely freedom is ordered in its inmost structure toward a covenant initiated by God calling forth a creaturely response that takes the form of what may be termed a vow. The nature of drama, then, lies in the fruitful tension implicit in the constitutive coincidence of this subjectivity that remains inherently free and this subjectivity’s objective binding to another, ultimately to God.⁹

But all of this is realized only in the New Covenant begun in Jesus Christ. God’s steadfast gift of love takes an infinitely new form in and through the gift of his own being in Jesus Christ. This gift takes the form further of a sacramental-Petrine Church, and thus of an infallibly effective presence of God in history. The new initiative by God in Jesus Christ is met with a new creaturely response in Mary, the nature and depth of which is disclosed in Mary’s spousal *fiat* that in turn becomes her *Magnificat* and makes her the *theotokos*–the Mother who bears God into the world.

Here, then, we learn the full meaning of God’s covenantal initiative with respect to creation–that it involves God’s entering history himself and staying there all the way through to his suffering forsakenness on the Cross; and of the creaturely vow in response to this new covenantal initiative–that it involves a *fiat*, a permitting passion so deep that it

⁸ Cf. *Deus caritas est* §3, 11, 13.

⁹ The free subject, and that to which the free subject is constitutively bound (God), each bear–in radically different (*maior dissimilitudo*) ways–an infinite depth bearing an intention of remaining bound together, in freedom, forever. What we properly term drama, in a word, has its ontological origin in the abiding depth and fruitful tension presupposed in the simultaneous unity-within-duality of subject (self) and object (other) in the free act.

enables giving birth to God and thus, as it were, giving God himself in response to God. And we learn the full meaning of this exchange between God and the creature in Jesus Christ and Mary in and through the sacramental Petrine-Marian Church that keeps the exchange infallibly—effectively and passionately—alive for the duration of history.

The true passion and interior power of the creature can be seen and fully realized only in terms of this new covenant and vow embodied in Jesus Christ and Mary and the sacramental-Marian Church. It is here alone that we learn the radical meaning of the drama characteristic of human action: of the fact that, as creatures, *we are freely-responsively (spousally) ordered to the whole God with the whole self, in a way that includes all of creation, forever.*

It is drama in this sense that alone, finally, shows us the truth of the link between freedom and reciprocal—constitutive—binding with God and others that *Evangelium vitae* insists upon as the presupposition for sustaining the *unconditional dignity* of the human person. To be sure, it is only those who live within the covenant—within the sacramental-Marian Church—who can understand this link in its full implications. But it is crucial to see here, with *Evangelium vitae*, that the supernatural vocation to share the life of God and the Gospel of Life rooted in this vocation have “a profound and persuasive echo in the heart of every person—believer and non-believer alike” (§2).¹⁰ As the encyclical says, “[b]ecause he is made by God..., man is naturally drawn to God. When he heeds the deepest yearnings of the heart, every man must make his own the words of truth expressed by St. Augustine: ‘You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you’” (§35).¹¹

¹⁰ “Even in the midst of difficulties and uncertainties, every person...can, by the light of reason and the hidden action of grace, come to recognize in the natural law written in the heart (cf. Rom. 2:14-15) the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end...” (EV §2).

¹¹ The point made here is summarized beautifully in the statement by Cardinal Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, following his citation of Paul, *Romans*, 2:14-15, in *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (New York/San Francisco: Crossroad/Ignatius Press, 2006), p. 91-93: “We find an impressive formulation of the same idea in the great monastic rule of St. Basil: ‘The love of God is not based on some discipline imposed on us from outside, but as a capacity and indeed a necessity

My proposal in the name of *Evangelium vitae*, then, is that liberal societies, by virtue of their neutral concepts of freedom and reason, ignore this restlessness with all the heights and depths of passion and interior power and hence drama implied therein. In a word, there is in liberalism, even on its best reading, no significant sense of the self as constitutively-structurally *capax Dei et alterius*. How so?

it is a constitutive element of our rational being.’ Basil uses an expression that was to become important in medieval mysticism when he speaks of the ‘spark of divine love that is innate in us’ [*Regulae fusius tractatae, Resp. 2:1*]. In the spirit of Johannine theology, Basil knows that love consists in keeping the commandments. This is why the spark of love that we possess as creatures of God means the following: ‘We have received in advance the capacity and the willingness to carry out all the divine commandments.... They are not something imposed from outside ourselves.’ Augustine presents the simple core of this truth when he writes, ‘We would not be able to formulate the judgment that one thing is better than another unless a basic understanding of the good were imprinted upon us’ [*De Trinitate, 8.3:4*].

“Accordingly, the first level, which we might call the *ontological level*, of the phenomenon ‘conscience’ means that a kind of *primal remembrance of the good and the true* (which are identical) is bestowed on us. There is an inherent existential tendency of man, who is created in the image of God, to tend toward that which is in keeping with God. Thanks to its origin, man’s being is in harmony with some things but not with others. This anamnesis of our origin, resulting from the fact that our being is constitutively in keeping with God, is...an inner sense, a capacity for recognition, in such a way that the one addressed recognizes in himself an echo of what is said to him. If he does not hide from his own self, he comes to the insight: *this* is the goal toward which my whole being tends, *this* is where I want to go.

“This *anamnesis of the Creator*, which is identical with the foundations of our existence, is the reason that *mission* is both *possible* and *justified*. The Gospel may and indeed must be proclaimed to the pagans, because this is what they are waiting for, even if they do not know this themselves (see Is. 42:4). Mission is justified when those it addresses encounter the word of the Gospel and recognize that *this* is what they were waiting for. This is what Paul means when he says that the Gentiles ‘are a law unto themselves’—not in the sense of the modern liberalistic idea of autonomy, where nothing can be posited higher than the subject, but in the much deeper sense that nothing belongs to me *less* than my own self, and that my ego is the place where I must transcend myself most profoundly, the place where I am touched by my ultimate origin and goal.”

Cf. also Ratzinger, “The Renewal of Moral Theology,” p. 367.

IV

First of all, it should be clear from the foregoing that the problem identified here regarding the nature of human life and action should manifest itself where liberalism takes its most characteristic form and indeed is at its strongest, and not at its worst—and hence not merely in extreme expressions such as abortion, embryonic stem cell research, and the like. The basic problem, in other words, lies in the assumptions that create liberal democratic societies' peculiar vulnerability toward these moral evils in the first place. We need to look first, therefore, at these societies' characteristic and most significant achievements, which, arguably, lie in human rights and in technology. We can rightly understand the sense in which the latter are truly positive achievements of the human spirit—and it bears emphasis that indeed they *are* such—only insofar as we understand the sense in which these achievements, in their characteristic liberal form, signify an *ontological absence* of God.

In liberalism, the self is understood to be originally *unbounded* by, hence *indifferent* to others. The self first constructs or contracts the relation to others that is not already—constitutively—*given with* his being. Relation to others is thus a matter first and most properly of a freedom conceived as a simple act of choice, the exercise of an option on the part of the self, even if liberalism at its best urges the importance of exercising that option. Consistent with such an understanding, the self's claim on others is ontologically prior to others' claim on the self. Rights, in other words, are conceived primarily as claims of protection against others, claims of immunity in relation to any possible (undue) influence by others.

To be sure, some liberal defenses of rights—for example, that of the American Thomas Jefferson—link their notion of rights with a Creator by insisting—accurately—that such rights are endowed in us unalienably by our Creator. The pertinent question, however, is whether even these liberal notions of rights that recognize God as their source take account of the fact that the creature's basic act as a creature occurs *from within* God's original offer of love that always already “binds” the creature and others in love. The creature's act at the most profound level is always an acting inside a being-given, and hence always responsive in nature. That act, therefore, cannot but begin, in its root meaning and however uncon-

sciously, as an act of natural obedient love and natural loving obedience. It follows, in the words of *Evangelium vitae*, that “being and life [are] a gift and a duty [*donum et munus*]” (§96). Rights flow from the “demands” implied in this gift and duty, and they are “rightly” conceived only from within these demands.¹² I know of no liberal notion of rights that properly recognizes the order indicated here.

All of this entails no attenuation whatsoever of the importance of rights. On the contrary, the point is merely to underscore that it is the constitutive call to other-centered service that requires in the first place the right of the self to all those conditions of its being that are necessary for the fulfillment of the call to service.¹³ The point is to show the sense in which rights in their dominant liberal interpretation serve both as a sign and as a cause of the *ontological absence* in the self of God and others.

The importance of what some may judge an arcane qualifier here can be seen in recalling the original creation and “original sin” of Adam and Eve. What transforms Adam’s act of freedom from an image of God—of God’s creativity—into a sin against God is just its original indifference to the creaturely order initiated by God. In enacting such indifference, Adam fractures the original community given not only with God but with Eve and with all other creatures. By virtue of his failure to take account of the constitutive claim of the other *in* the original act of Adam—which is to say, by virtue of his precipitous, precisely non-obedient, assertion of his rights

¹² Note, for example, how the notion of a right is understood in the following statements: “Thus, work is primarily a right because it is a duty arising from humanity’s social relations. It expresses humanity’s vocation to service and solidarity” (John Paul II, *Go in Peace*, 193). “The Second Vatican Council reaffirms the traditional Catholic doctrine which holds that men and women, as spiritual creatures, can know the truth and therefore have the duty and the right to seek it” (Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, St. Peter’s Square, 4 December 2005, honoring the 40th anniversary of *Dignitatis humanae*, referring to §3). Note that it is the capacity for and duty to seek the truth about God, and not immunity from coercion, that most basically shapes the nature of the right to religious freedom, even as this capacity and duty as a matter of principle require such immunity.

¹³ This does not mean that the self is not a bearer of rights already in its own substantial identity. It means, rather, that the self in its substantial identity is originally constituted as and toward response (to God and others).

before creation—Adam institutes the original absence of God in an act that results in the first culture of death.¹⁴

We must face the irony implied in the above argument in all of its depth and breadth: liberalism's defense of individual rights presupposes an original-ontological indifference of the self toward the other that implies an inner dynamic for undermining the universal protection *intended* by this defense. However contrary to liberalism's own best moral intentions, such indifference implies a logic of the priority of the "strong" over the "weak"—that is, of the "independent" over the "dependent." It fails to recognize the ontological dependence of *all selves* upon God and indeed others that alone enables the true strength and justifies the unconditional dignity of all selves, even—especially—the "weak" and the "dependent."

We turn, then, to liberalism's sense of intelligent order as primarily technological. (As some have commented, technology is the ontology of modernity.) Once again our focus is not primarily on morally evil practices of (bio) technology like cloning and *in vitro* fertilization, but on the deeper assumptions of liberalism that create the ontological vulnerability toward these practices in the first place, and are thus present already in the *achievements* of technology. Consider, for example, the patterns of order implied in liberal society's achievements in the media of communication such as cell phones, the Internet, daily newspapers, television, and the like.

These media invite communication that tends toward extroversion (turning outward) and superficiality (remaining on the surface). Experience as the acquisition and manipulation of digitally accessible bits of information, or again as the encounter with fragmented "parts," the

¹⁴ Cf. the statement of Cardinal Ratzinger in his *A New Song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy Today* (New York NY: Crossroad, 1996): "In the account of the Fall one sees what it looks like when one accepts Satan's offer of power. Power appears as the opposite of obedience and freedom as the opposite of responsibility..." (p. 44). Again: "the power of being is not one's own power; it is the power of the creator" (p. 45). And see the statement regarding the power of Jesus that Ratzinger cites from Guardini: "Jesus' entire existence is a translation of power into humility...into obedience to the will of the Father. Obedience is not secondary for Jesus, but forms the core of his being..." (p. 42).

instantaneous addition of which yields but fragmented “wholes.” Experience without a receptive sensorium. Extensivity without intensification. Dispersal into the “bad infinity” of endlessly successive surface presences—as distinct from gathering into the “good infinity” of depth and height. And so on. The media of communication, in short, by their inner logic promote inattentiveness—an incapacity for the patient attentiveness necessary for the self in its integrity to relate to the other in its integrity. It is scarcely accidental that liberal society’s characteristic act is an act of consumption and its characteristic exchange an exchange of commerce.

The conventional objection to the foregoing, of course, is that, whatever the supposed logic of the instruments mentioned, it depends on how we choose to use them that counts in the end. Given present limits, I can only point out here that my argument is that, *insofar* as our culture’s experience of reality is mediated by such instruments, its modes of thinking and acting will be rendered increasingly incapable of a genuine immanent-transcendent relation to God and others.¹⁵ (Modern technology involves change simultaneously in the object and in the subject of experience and knowledge.) I would even say that one can almost describe liberalism best as a massive Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

I referred at the outset of this paper to a kind of movement and noise indicative not of the presence but the absence of genuine drama. The lack of appreciation in a liberal society for the patience and silence required for any truly dramatic human movement and speech inevitably expresses itself—in the face of pain and the demand for self-sacrifice—in the marginalization unto elimination of those who cannot move and cannot speak, on the basis of the rights and interests of those who can. *We need to understand the extent to which the security of one’s rights in a liberal culture is coextensive with the capacity to move around and make noise.*¹⁶

¹⁵ We can also invite attention here to the vast absorption of time, resources, and energy to the production of such instruments in the first place—and to what such absorption implies about the intellectual habits and ontological (theological, anthropological, spiritual) priorities of a culture.

¹⁶ Cf., e.g., the statement cited earlier from *Evangelium vitae*, which notes the tendency today to equate “dignity with capacity for verbal and explicit, or at least perceptible, communication” (§19).

But the further burden of my earlier argument in the name of *Evangelium vitae* was that the creaturely relation to God and others needed to respond adequately to liberalism's rights and technological order can be conceived and carried through finally only insofar as that relation is sustained by the New Covenant initiated in Jesus Christ, in and through his sacramental Petrine-Marian Church. The implication of my argument, in other words, is that the absence of God indicated in liberal societies' notions of freedom and rights and technologically rationalized order cannot but—in some significant sense—both presuppose and promote the effective absence of a sacramental-Marian Church.

This effective absence takes at least two forms. First, in American liberal society there was, of course, no sacramental-Marian Church that shaped the dominant patterns of its thought and action and institutions from the beginning. Max Weber was right to see that the crucial difference of Calvinism—in the Puritan form that prevailed in America—from Catholicism lay in Puritanism's elimination of sacrament, especially the sacrament of confession, even if he himself did not develop the full implications of this difference.¹⁷ There was in Puritanism no recognition of an infallible effective (Petrine) presence of God in history, nor was there any permanently abiding Marian response from the side of the creature that first enabled that infallible effective presence. The Puritan, therefore, could never be assured of his standing before God, of a redeeming relation to God become effective in him. He could never be certain that such a relation was truly *given*. To be sure, this does not mean for the Puritan that this relation was simply to be constructed by him. It does imply, however, that he had to look to himself as an individual, to his individual behavior, to find signs of God's redeeming action in him. The result is a logic whereby *sola fide* undergoes an inversion into an emphasis on man's rationalized worldly activity—rationalized in order that one's life will be a *sign* of the effective presence of God's redemptive act.

To be sure, the Puritans scarcely denied the covenant! The point is simply that, with the removal of Petrine sacrament and Marian responsiveness, and hence with the loss of an always-already, effectively-historically

¹⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London UK: Routledge, 1992).

given act of God, covenantal freedom tends to become on man's part simply contractual in nature, even as that contractual freedom reinforces individualistically-conceived rights and Cartesianized-technological rationalization of worldly order. It is important to ponder the link between this absence of a sacramental-Marian Church in America and the ontological indifference of American liberalism's contractual freedom (self-centered rights)¹⁸ and instrumentalist intelligence (technological order).¹⁹

Second, then, insofar as a sacramental-Marian Church does exist in a liberal society, the risk is that it will seek to evangelize the culture in terms taken over from the dominant liberalism. The risk, in other words, is that it will conceive its task primarily in terms of taking over rights in the terms given by the dominant culture, and then seeing to it that these rights are applied in the hard cases where they are increasingly not applied today: to human beings at the very beginning or the very end of their lives. Of course, it is important that members of the Church do this. The difficulty, if what we have argued is accurate, is that such an approach to evangelization leaves in place the notion of rights that has rendered "weak" human beings vulnerable in the first place.

The further risk in this connection is that (even) members of the sacramental-Marian Church themselves will undertake evangelization efforts in a way that relies disproportionately on the very media that presuppose and promote the dominant liberal-technological patterns of movement and sound. Consider the production of paper, the calling of meetings, the assembling of committees of experts, the multiplication of ministries (and inflation of ministerial titles), all of which are aided and abetted by the faxes and cell phones and computers and email services and news reports that generate still higher piles of paper, more frequent

¹⁸ That is, ontologically, and not necessarily psychologically, self-centered: recall what was said earlier about the evidence of widespread sincere belief in God and voluntary generosity of Americans.

¹⁹ What is key here, then, is the absence of a sufficiently deep and integrated sense in Puritanism of what is *abidingly-objectively offered* by God in the orders, respectively, of creation and redemption (and of how the loss of this "objectively given" in one order affects the idea of what is "objectively given" in the other order as well)—but this is for further development elsewhere.

meetings, and more extensive chattering by committee. The risk, in short, is that, in the Church's evangelizing efforts, it will have eliminated the old authoritarian clericalism only to replace this with a mellow democratic clericalism appropriate for the age of Starbucks managers. (Clericalism in the form of secular management skills.²⁰)

To be sure, and once again: it is indispensable that we defend rights, and we surely cannot function today without the use of electronic media and the like. The simple but basic point is that we need to transform these from the inside out from their dominant liberal-technological understanding. How are we to begin to do this?

V

Simply by being who we are in our creaturely origin and destiny and as members of the sacramental-Petrine and Marian Church. In light of the foregoing, we can highlight two important aspects of what this entails.

First, we need to recuperate the *Dies Domini*, the day of the Lord. We need to recuperate this, that is, in its comprehensive meaning as expressed in the Eucharist and in Mary's fiat, and not only on Sunday but in the time that is inside every day. We must, as often insisted by Cardinal Ratzinger, recover the meaning of our being as created for worship.²¹ We must recover the still point lying at the heart of every authentic human action and of all authentic human speech—the stillness which, Ratzinger reminds

²⁰ The key to avoiding clericalism is suggested in the following statement by Cardinal Ratzinger in *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, p. 95: "The true meaning of the teaching authority of the pope is that he is the advocate of Christian memory." See n12 for an amplification of what is meant by memory here. Clericalism thus might be said, in light of this and in the context of the present argument, to indicate management techniques that are insufficiently integrated by and into Christian memory. And here it is helpful to recall Ratzinger's abiding presupposition that Mary is the anterior condition for Petrine memory.

²¹ "Worship, understood in the correct sense, means that I am truly myself only when I form relationships.... Worship means [reaching beyond finite goals] into being inwardly at one with him who wished me to exist as a partner in a relationship with him and who has given me freedom precisely in this" (Ratzinger, *God and the World*, pp. 111-12).

us, is not inactivity but a matter of sinking the roots of our being into the fruitful stillness of God.²²

In the words of St. Ambrose cited in *Evangelium vitae*, when God rested from every work, “he rested in the depths of man, ...in man’s mind and in his thought” (§35). It is our resting in God who in turn rests in us that must be unfolded into an entire way of life and culture.

Secondly, and as an integral expression of our recovery of the *Dies Domini*, we need to embody the true meaning of freedom in its constitutive order as the truth of a love destined for expression in a vow. Such a vow takes historical-ecclesial form in two states of life: consecrated virginity and sacramental marriage. Both of these states express a permanent spousal relation to God, involve the whole self and—each in its own way—include relation to the whole world. These two states of life, though of course they have always been of fundamental importance for the Church and the world, take on a special significance in light of Pope John Paul II’s and now Benedict XVI’s distinctive mission to culture, and indeed of Vatican II’s profound opening to the world and renewed sense of the laity’s ecclesial-secular vocation.

Regarding the virginal state of life: in light of the above, there is particular need for that form of consecrated virginity that goes to the heart of the world and remains there (the “secular” form of consecrated life: secular institutes), so that the meaning of man as *capax Dei*, as meant for

²² Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Co-Workers in the Truth* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 338. Cf. in this connection the comprehensive statement of EV §83: “We need first of all to foster in ourselves and in others a contemplative outlook. Such an outlook arises from faith in the God of life who has created every individual as a ‘wonder’ (cf. Ps. 1139:14). It is the outlook of those who see life in its deeper meaning, who grasp its utter gratuitousness, its beauty and its invitation to freedom and responsibility. It is the outlook of those who do not presume to take possession of reality, but instead accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person his living image (cf. Gen 1:27; Ps 8:5). This outlook does not give into discouragement when confronted by those who are sick, suffering, outcast or at death’s door. Instead, in all these situations it feels challenged to find meaning, and precisely in these circumstances it is open to perceiving in the fact of every person a call to encounter, dialogue and solidarity. It is time for all of us to adopt this outlook and with deep religious awe to rediscover the ability to revere and honor every person.”

worship, can be lived truly from inside every thought and every action, assisting every creaturely being and every aspect of every creaturely being to realize its deepest truth, at once in its own “legitimate autonomy” and in relation to God.

Regarding the marital state of life: as the “domestic church” and as the original home of human community, the family plays a constitutive role in the revelation of the meaning of freedom as an order of permanently-naturally binding love that is fruitful. Fatherhood, motherhood, and childhood each make an indispensable contribution to the meaning of life as fruitful gift-giving and receiving. It is in the family that we learn the meaning of the unconditional—not merely contracted—worth of the small and the weak and the vulnerable. We learn that the true, the good, and the beautiful originate in being and not in having or producing—that they are in the first instance neither acts of consumption nor commercial transactions nor acts of power and self-aggrandizement. We learn the proper meaning of time and space and motion—and of *techné*—as matters first of the patient and organic unfolding of life and love.

CONCLUSION

The cultural problem in liberal societies—including Anglo-American liberal society, and notwithstanding the sincerity of this society’s religious intentionality, which I emphatically grant—is what it is in every time and place of history: the absence of God. The problems with respect to a growing culture of death in such societies are moral and political only as more basically theological-ontological and spiritual. This is why John Paul II made his own the statement that “the twenty-first century will be the century of religion or it won’t be at all.”²³ The heart of my argument has been that action can finally be dramatic only by entering life in its depths, all the way down into the encounter with the divine source of being, down to the echo of the Marian *fiat* and *magnificat* welling up from within the core of creaturely-human being,²⁴ an encounter that then must

²³ *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), pp. 228-29.

²⁴ Cf. Maurice Zundel, in *Magnificat*, March 27, p. 375.

be unfolded into an entire way of life.²⁵ Passion, interiority, and God live and die together, and it is the absence of these together—and the absence of drama in this sense—that most basically accounts for liberal societies' drift toward a culture of death.

²⁵ Cf. Cardinal Ratzinger's comments regarding the nature of creaturely autonomy, human freedom as shared freedom, the human being as openness to the infinite—to God, and regarding the fact that it is martyrdom (see EV §90) that shows "us, at one and the same time, the path to understanding Christ and to understanding what it means to be human beings" (thereby revealing what is finally entailed in what we have termed the dramatic nature of life). Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "The Renewal of Moral Theology: Perspectives of Vatican II and *Veritatis Splendor*," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32/2 (2005): 357-68; here, pp. 366-68.

