

THE POLITICS OF A CULTURE OF LIFE

Kevin E. Miller

BY VIRTUE OF THE MANNER in which Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* ("The Gospel of Life") provides an account and defense of "the value and inviolability of human life," it could be said to constitute the second volume of a two-volume work. The first volume of this work was *Veritatis Splendor* ("The Splendor of Truth," 1993). In that encyclical John Paul clarified, against certain tendencies in moral philosophy and theology today, that there exist exceptionless moral norms and that these express the meaning of the human person as this meaning can be discerned both from nature and, more fully, from the Gospel. *Evangelium Vitae* takes up this theme explicitly and develops it with respect to a set of concrete issues whose great importance owes both to their gravity and to their contemporary relevance, namely, those issues revolving around human life.ⁱ

A brief account of the argument is as follows: Human persons are created by God; they are destined for the fullness of communion with God; God's gracious granting to us of that communion is an act of mercy that cost the life of the Son of God in the flesh, because of human sin. This establishes the value of human life. In view of this value, directly to take an innocent human life is contrary to justice. Justice, furthermore, is but the beginning of love, and the dignity that is ours by God's grace makes us worthy of a love that transcends the minimal requirements of justice. These principles underlie unconditional opposition to such actions as abortion and euthanasia.

But the issues that John Paul addresses have a political dimension. The raging controversies concerning these issues are in part controversies about how they should be addressed legislatively, that is, by the political community as such. John Paul does not prescind from this dimension, since he calls for legal protection of all human life, especially the lives of those most vulnerable today, the unborn and the sick and elderly.ⁱⁱ He even addresses a "life issue" that is by definition a political or legal issue, namely, that of capital punishment. Abortion and euthanasia are generally done by individuals, so that the political question concerning these issues (chiefly, when and whether the civil law should regulate individuals' choices) is not identical with the moral question (the rectitude of those choices). Capital punishment, by contrast, is an act of the political community. The moral question concerning capital punishment is therefore a question about the role of that community.

Fully to understand "the Gospel of life," then, requires that we grasp the

vision of politics that John Paul wishes to communicate. His call for political protection of the vulnerable reflects not only the gravity of life issues but also a choice of one of several possible, competing accounts of the meaning or purpose of politics. In fact, not all such accounts are compatible with "the Gospel of life." This expression means not only "the Good News *concerning* life" but also "the Good News *represented by* life" in view of its value or dignity. Not all accounts of politics rejoice in life as "Good News."

It is my intention in this paper to clarify this connection by examining the basis in justice and love of the "culture of life" of which John Paul speaks and the political implications of such a culture. The true dignity of human life is recognized only when fundamental "rights" such as the "right to life" are seen as matters of an order of justice (and love) constituting a genuinely common good, so that it is essentially good for me to respect your life (and vice-versa). Such a recognition is necessary for life to be secure. If my respect for your life issues from a mere compromise designed to secure the individualistic good of my life at the price of my own dignity, your right to life will be ungrounded in principle and your life insecure.

A political community will therefore secure the right to life only if it is constituted with the end or goal of a common good of justice, of which absolute "rights" are an essential part.ⁱⁱⁱ A political community founded upon the principles of classical liberalism presupposes subjectivistic, individualistic rights-claims and a natural war of all against all over these claims, and makes justice an artifact of a merely contractarian politics that promotes peace for the sake of individuals' desires. Such a political community will not secure the right to life, because it will be opposed in principle to respect for life.

THE FAILURE OF CLASSICAL LIBERALISM

Politics based upon a common good identical with a real order of morality or justice does not take on every moral issue, prescribing every virtue and proscribing every vice. No one moral issue wholly encompasses the common good of the political community. Some matters, like life-issues, are so fundamental that no competing good takes precedence over legislation designed to bring about justice in their regard (*Evangelium Vitae* #71). In other cases, concern for such values as respect for the law or the integrity of a certain sphere of privacy for oneself or one's family, values that are also dimensions of the common good, may make "legislating morality" imprudent. This is most often the case when the "morality" at issue is that of actions that have little or no direct effect upon others without their consent.^{iv} However, it must be emphasized that the judgments needed in such cases are

prudential and that prudence sometimes might require legislation touching consensual matters. Even actions in this category, and the absence of laws proscribing such actions when the actions are immoral, can easily affect the ethos of the community and therefore the common good.

The classical liberal understanding of politics, originated by Thomas Hobbes, stands in contrast. Classical liberalism founds politics only upon each citizen's subjective desire not to be injured or restrained, and upon his or her consent to a contract to minimize injury and restraint.^v That is, its foundational concern is to maximize each citizen's sphere of autonomy. It therefore provides little or no basis for legislation proscribing "consensual" actions, no matter how immoral we might judge them to be. Classical liberals maintain as a matter of principle that the law may intervene only when an action would affect another without his or her consent.

Classical liberalism is attractive because it seems at first glance an excellent foundation for protection of human rights, including the right to life of the vulnerable, from violations by either individuals or a tyrannical state. In fact, a significant portion of the energy of the right-to-life movement has been expended upon elaborating precisely a classical liberal justification for laws against such actions as abortion.^{vi} Laws protecting the lives of the unborn are not, it is said in response to the objections of "pro-choice" opponents, mere instances of "legislating morality," for the unborn child is another human being, a person or at least destined for personhood. It is essential to the social contract (this classical expression may or may not be used, but it probably corresponds to the concept frequently in mind) whereby all of our lives are protected that we not begin to exclude classes of human beings from the protection of the law. Otherwise we run the risk of sliding down a "slippery slope," endangering our own lives as well.

The first thing that should be said about this classical liberal appeal to enlightened self-interest is that it has not worked. To speak only of abortion: A majority of Americans are not persuaded that the law should protect the lives of the unborn. A significant minority would allow few or no restrictions upon the practice of abortion. Many more would allow some restrictions, even significant ones, but they continue to deny, however uneasily, the proposition that it would ultimately be best to protect unborn life without compromise. And 23 years after *Roe v. Wade*, there have been few successful efforts to enact even such "moderate" restrictions upon abortion as the Supreme Court seems willing to deem constitutional.

A likely part of the problem is that people do not in fact see their own lives as imperiled. Compromise is necessary only if I am not strong enough to get what I want without the cost that compromise imposes. Conceivably, most

Americans imagine they have the political strength to ensure that the social contract will continue to protect their lives for as long as they wish. And for the most part, for the foreseeable future, these people may be correct. Another possibly significant factor is that many people's conception of the good or worthy life includes such autonomy as would outweigh some attendant risk to themselves.

THE CULTURE OF DEATH

In view of these reflections upon our situation, I turn to some reflections upon *Evangelium Vitae* in the form of exegesis and commentary, in order to clarify why classical liberalism has not secured the right to life, and then to illumine the alternative. John Paul begins his encyclical by offering a diagnosis of our situation. He wishes to take up especially the problem of attacks against life "in its earliest and in its final stages" (#11). To understand the context of these attacks, John Paul says, we must consider a "reality, which can be described as a veritable *structure of sin*" (#12). Now, the pope is no more a cultural determinist than an economic determinist. Significantly, he believes that nothing can wholly suppress our consciences (#24). But the way we see reality is conditioned, if not determined, by such lenses as that of our culture, and this will have implications when we make choices. And to the extent that our culture teaches us to see reality in a distorted way—to the extent, that is, that it leads us away from the truth—and to the extent that it thereby teaches us to sin in action, so that we are alienated, intellect and will, from God and from the reality of creation: to that extent, it is meaningful to speak of a "structure of sin."^{vii}

To explain the nature of this structure of sin, John Paul indicates that our culture denies solidarity and adds that it is excessively concerned with efficiency (#12). It is necessary to explicate the relationship between these characteristics. Denial of solidarity is denial that our flourishing is caught up with that of others by the nature of things, not only by the requirements of a compromise. Theologically, denial of solidarity goes so far as to deny the bond of love established among all human beings by the salvific actions of Christ, the universal Redeemer.^{viii}

But another way of expressing this is to say that denying solidarity is equivalent to affirming that other persons are at most means to our self-gratification. It may be that what gives me pleasure will give you pleasure, or it may not. If not, I, to the extent that I deny solidarity, will satisfy myself at your expense as much as I am able. Only solidarity, the disposition wherein I affirm that I cannot make myself happy by using you, will overcome such selfishness. The reason that solidarity, so conceived, is opposed to excessive

concern with "efficiency" is that efficiency looks only to "getting things done" (cf. #22-23). When my attitude toward others reflects only or primarily such a concern, I will take no account of their good, their flourishing or happiness. When what I want to "get done" is at odds with what they want to "get done," we will be set against one another—precisely the opposite of solidarity.

Remarkably, John Paul describes the culture that arises from these attitudes as "a veritable `culture of death,'" in which there is "a kind of *conspiracy against life*" (#12). Once it is accepted that I may use others as much as I can, there is no reason in principle why that "use" should regard even the bare lives of others. Hobbes saw this and concluded that "every man has a right to every thing; even to one another's body."^{ix} I may well have no desire to kill other human beings. I may be so emotionally attached to some others that their deaths would cause me great unhappiness. But if my primary concern is what I want and how to get it, the solicitude that issues from my attachments will be characterized by all the instability that marks the wholly subjective. Any coincidence of the good of others, whether the good of their lives or lesser goods, with my own subjectively-conceived good will be merely accidental and contingent.

Furthermore, we know that many people at least sometimes feel themselves greatly burdened by the presence, condition, or actions of certain others. When those feeling burdened are powerful and the others are vulnerable, the denial of solidarity and excessive concern with efficiency that give rise to the culture of death are therefore likely in fact to endanger some people. It might be objected that a rational view, looking to the long term, would cause me to restrain myself when I have the desire and the opportunity to use others even to the point of killing them. But apart from the likelihood that the emotions of the moment will sometimes overwhelm such considerations, there is the further problem that the decisions about what I will be allowed to get away with will frequently be made at the societal level. Whereas I as an individual might want to take into account the possible repercussions of my own lack of concern for the vulnerable when I am, perhaps, rendered vulnerable by age or sickness or other factors, it is harder to make the case that a relatively powerful group will need to worry about the long term, even if its members, who come and go, will. And it is groups—factions—whose interests tend to dominate on the level of society. What will result, John Paul says, is "a *war of the powerful against the weak*" (#12).

In any case, the notion of freedom that denies solidarity and exalts efficiency will be that of a "freedom of `the strong'" (#19). Hence, "social life" in the culture of death "ventures on to the shifting sands of complete

relativism. At that point, *everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargaining: even... the right to life*" (#20). For as freedom requires strength, "rights" too become either what the strong desire, or what the not-entirely-strong can get in return for something else.^x The more vulnerable, the weaker, a group is, the more ineffective will be its negotiating position. So society recognizes the "right to choose" an abortion but not the "right to life" of unborn babies (cf. #18).

POWER POLITICS

To construct anything resembling a society, some negotiation will be necessary. Now, reference to "negotiation" brings us back to the level of politics, for it is in the political sphere that negotiations concerning rights take place. But insofar as politics expresses and serves culture, an attempt to solve politically the question of what rights-claims are to be respected or overridden will never rise above the level of raw power in a "culture of death." And classical liberal politics is inextricably linked with the culture of death.

The social contract, and the classical liberal politics of negotiation that write, sign, and enforce it, presuppose that there is in principle a genuine conflict of interest or of "rights" among human beings. The social contract is necessary only if I see your good as at odds with mine. If I see my serving your good as my own good as well, I will not ask you to give anything up in return for my serving it; and vice-versa. But if our goods are incompatible, a "war of the powerful against the weak" over rights-claims will arise. And because no one is all-*powerful*, this war will be inconclusive. A protracted state of war will make life "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."^{xi}

The social contract presupposes such a natural state of war. It presupposes that we are naturally each other's enemies, not partners or friends. "Naturally" here means "born or made to be." That is, what is at issue is the relationship of politics and law to human flourishing, to our noble aspirations. For the classical liberal, such aspirations lead to war. The pacifying function of politics is at odds with those aspirations.

Even as classical liberal politics imposes peace, it does not seek to reconcile enemies. Therefore it only institutionalizes the culture of death that manifests the conflict that arises when I see you and your rights as, at best, instrumentally good for me. Insofar as the culture of death is institutionalized, furthermore, it is reinforced. The very practice of a politics that sets as its goal mediating between conflicting rights-claims further encourages one to see such claims, such conflict, as reflecting the structure of reality in principle or by nature. Such politics itself teaches its practitioners to see the other as

enemy by nature.

There is then, as if the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy, nothing to the political task but *en-force-ment*. This has particular consequences for the politics of a democracy. We are given to associate democracy with consent rather than with force. In fact, of course, the "majority" consents and then forces the "minority" to do its will. This becomes especially problematic when the majority's consent to legislation is based upon the maximization of its power—when it considers itself free to enforce anything it can get away with and to reject any imposition on itself except as a necessary exchange for something more desirable. That is, democracy becomes problematic when it becomes merely a relatively peaceful channel for the conflict that is really still the war of the powerful against the weak.

It is clear that this is to a great extent what has become of democracy.^{xii} Politics in general, and democracy in particular, conceived as I have explained cannot even deliver on their promise of peace, let alone bring about justice. The relativism of radical autonomy does not, as John Paul notes, guarantee tolerance; crimes have been committed in its name (#70). Strangely, in fact, liberalism permits totalitarian legislation, because all actions of others colorably affect me without my consent.^{xiii} At the very best, a compromise that is founded upon a principled denial of any common ground other than the desire for enforced peace as a necessary evil will be as unstable as the subjective conviction that such peace is better than principled war, however hellish, against one's natural enemies.

But even to the extent that the search for compromise is sincere, it probably remains incompatible with a successful appeal for legal protection of vulnerable lives, for example, protection of the unborn through restriction of abortion. Once it is accepted in principle—as the liberal politics of negotiated compromise cannot but admit as its foundation—that the other, including the unborn, is an enemy, the logical response to the most conclusive of arguments that the unborn baby is an *other* person becomes (to paraphrase Stalin), "How many divisions does the unborn baby have?" And so on, *mutatis mutandis*, with respect to all who are vulnerable. Accordingly, we should not be surprised that attempts to argue the pro-life position in the political sphere from the social contract have not been successful. This reflects no inconsistency on the part of our society. It is wholly consistent with the common origin of the social contract and the culture of death. It reflects the very calculation that leads to the social contract.^{xiv}

As a final consideration, someone might propose that our Declaration of Independence offers a foundation for "rights" that is stronger than that of pure social contract theory. We are endowed by our Creator with rights, first

among these the right to life. It is the purpose of politics to secure these rights. Democratic consent is a means whereby the success of politics in this mission can be judged. This understanding of rights and of politics even seems consistent with John Paul's concern for the recognition of certain rights as objective and fundamental (#71). And it is indeed a good beginning.

However, if subjectivistic individualism is to be overcome, this endowment of rights must be seen as something more than what might be called "divine positivism." Otherwise all we have done is shifted the motivation for my respect for your rights from your power to God's. You remain for me but an instrumental good, albeit now to the end of my salvation and not just to the maximization of my earthly life and happiness. This is a more powerful motive—but the question remains open whether a motive *qua* "powerful" can ever really be satisfying, can ever really avail. At some point I may decide that it is "better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven," that divine positivism is an ignoble foundation for justice. God may have more divisions than an unborn baby, but as long as I am used to seeing Him and the baby as my enemies, as obstacles to the happiness of autonomy, I may well continue to fight them in a tragic war.^{xv}

THE BEAUTY OF LIFE

Evangelium Vitae suggests a way of explaining how my doing what is good for you is good for me; that is, it proposes a vision of justice (and, in view of the Gospel, love) as our common good. A new account of politics will follow from this explanation. John Paul stands in continuity with an ancient tradition that what is "in it for me" when I render justice to others is *beauty*. Human life's value is manifest in beauty; and as beautiful, life invites us to act toward it in a manner commensurate with its beauty (#83). But so to act gives me a share in the beauty of the object of my action. Because beauty is a transcendental quality, it can genuinely be common to you and me. Unlike our sharing of an apple, wherein any part that is yours cannot be mine as well and vice-versa, in our simultaneous sharing in beauty my share does not diminish yours.^{xvi}

In its full and classical sense, "beauty" encompasses the discernible perfection wherein a thing is exactly as it should be. It expresses a comprehensive fittingness. This implies, of course, reference to the kind of being that a thing is. The beautiful will not include the same features for a river as for a tulip, for a tulip as for a dog, for a dog as for a human person. For a human person, the beautiful encompasses dispositions or habits, loves, as well as actions. That is, it includes those mysterious qualities that we

attribute to the soul.

As Aristotle explains, human excellence or virtue is made fully real and perfect by beauty—it is attaining beauty that makes virtue, virtue.^{xvii} The disposition to the good that is moral or ethical virtue makes possible, and is in turn expressed in action by, the practical intellectual virtue of prudence, or excellence in deliberation, which being given its right bearings by ethical virtue chooses actions that are beautiful as well as efficient.^{xviii} Thus, when I do what is right (just or loving), what is to the good of other persons (or even things, over which I have dominion, but which, John Paul says [#42], I may not "use and misuse"), this is to my good as well because it gives me a share in beauty. And the loss of human beauty that results from evil actions is greater than even the loss of this life. John Paul can therefore affirm that wrongs against persons "do more harm to those who practice them than to those who suffer the injury" (#3, quoting *Gaudium et Spes* #27; cf. also #48).^{xix}

This implies that being, and dispositions and actions respecting being, have meaning, meaning not given by me. It implies, that is, that there is a real and gratuitous "fittingness" about certain ways of seeing and treating other persons (or things). It implies that our attitude toward reality must be one of reception, prior to any possible manipulation.^{xx} It implies that we will learn from the meaning of personhood how we ought to treat persons. Some actions (for example, the direct killing of an innocent person) will always be incompatible with the beautiful—they are un-integrable into beautiful life. This establishes the minimal requirements for justice.^{xxi}

John Paul's explanation of the "culture of life" for which he calls includes significant reference to these principles. The members of such a culture are precisely "those who see life in its deeper meaning, who grasp its utter gratuitousness, its beauty and its invitation to freedom and responsibility... who do not presume to take possession of reality but instead accept it as a gift..." In view of such an outlook, and in response to the "invitation" of which it takes note, it will be possible "to *revere and honor every person*" (#83).^{xxii}

It might be asked how we can know that we have this capacity. For Aristotle, any capacity or potentiality of soul is known from its activity. That is, we observe that we recognize beauty, and we conclude that the soul has the capacity so to do. No *a priori* epistemological justification for this or any other kind of knowledge is necessary. Aristotle therefore says that "activities and actions are prior to potentialities according to reason," even though potentialities are existentially prior.^{xxiii} Hence, claims concerning the beautiful can be made and judged only by those who have experienced beauty.

John Paul calls the outlook of which he speaks "*a contemplative outlook.*" By

contemplation, we dispose ourselves to receive and accept rather than to manipulate. We allow the world to affect us rather than insisting, or before we insist, upon changing the world. Another way to describe this is to say that we "celebrate." In fact, John Paul says that to develop a culture of life, it is necessary that the Gospel of life be proclaimed, celebrated, and served; and he places the above remarks at the start of his explanation of "celebrating the Gospel of life."

To celebrate something is precisely to allow oneself to be affected by its beauty. So far has our culture departed from "a contemplative outlook" that we are perhaps not immediately inclined to this understanding of celebration.

Even celebration becomes an act of creation on our part, rather than our response to creation that presents itself to us gratuitously. Thus we become almost obsessed with self-expression through novel forms of "celebration," even that celebration of the life of the Reign of God that is the Church's liturgy. But approached with a contemplative outlook, the liturgy is in fact most important for developing our appreciation of the beauty of life (#84).^{xxiv}

Pope John Paul's effort in this encyclical can also be characterized as an attempt to show the beauty of human life and respect for life. Inasmuch as proclamation of, celebration of, and service to the Gospel of life are what are necessary to develop a culture of life, and inasmuch as *Evangelium Vitae* is a call for such a culture, it would in fact be surprising if the encyclical did not include those elements of proclamation, celebration, and service. Most relevant for our understanding of how the encyclical seeks to persuade are the elements of proclamation and celebration.

John Paul gives a rational account of the beauty of life in relationship to its Creator and Redeemer, its Beginning and End. But the essence of the proclamation within which the pope gives this account is not syllogistic argument, but rather depiction of life in its fullness so as to put on display its beauty and the beauty of affirmation of life, beginning with and modeled after that living affirmation of life that is God's creative and saving work (cf. #1, 29-51 [ch. 2, "The Christian Message Concerning Life"] especially). This is not John Paul's first use of such an approach.^{xxv} Celebration too, which flows from proclamation as a "setting in which the beauty and grandeur of this Gospel is handed on" (#83), is included in the approach. This is especially evident when in his conclusion the pope looks contemplatively "to the Lord Jesus... `the Life' which `was made manifest'" (#102), leading to prayer in union with the Mother of the living.

And concerning the persuasive utility of this approach: Despite the degree of continued resistance of our world to the pope's message, of late he seems

to some extent to be disarming, if not yet converting, the world. The press seems, of late, to respect this man and what he says, even while not yet sure why. The coverage of *Evangelium Vitae's* release in particular was positive, at least by comparison to some of the coverage given related stories during the past decades, and in a way that cannot be fully explained by the press's edification at some of the more "progressive" conclusions such as those concerning capital punishment or respect for the environment. I modestly propose that souls are not yet so altogether damaged as to be wholly unable to recognize beauty when they see it. By an act of will, radical rebellion may (and certainly does) persist, but even the confirmed rebels occasionally fall silent in awe.^{xxvi}

A POLITICS OF THE BEAUTIFUL

The politics that expresses this view of the world is related to classical liberal politics as the contemplative or receptive attitude is related to the merely manipulative. That is, it is a politics that responds to the invitation of reality and of the human person in particular to beauty, rather than a forceful, if calculated, expression of untutored desire. It seeks to instantiate the common good that beauty in human action represents.^{xxvii} It is a politics of friends, not of enemies. As such it is much more than a system or a set of techniques. No mere cleverness, but the practical wisdom that results from experiences of beauty in action, makes possible understanding of political deliberation.^{xxviii} And this conception of politics implies no moral/political distinction. The moral is *ipso facto* the political. While identifying an action as moral or immoral does not sufficiently warrant the political conclusion that the action should be prescribed or proscribed by civil law, prudential delimitation of the sphere of the political does not reflect a difference in kind between the principles of morality and the principles of politics.^{xxix}

Especially important in this connection is the relevance of Christian love, the perfection of justice, for politics. As has been indicated, the ultimate reason that the direct killing of the innocent is evil is that it is contrary to love (#41, 77). John Paul's celebration of the beauty of life and of respect for life takes its bearings from this ultimate principle. And loving affirmation of life requires more than does justice alone. But prudence seems rather narrowly to delimit the degree to which the civil law should compel acts of love beyond justice.

At least one distinction is in order, however: that between what prudence allows by way of legal requirements concerning the actions of individuals, and what may be asked of the political community as such. Just as individuals should regard themselves as required by the moral law to be more

virtuous than the civil law may prudently command, it may also be the case that the political community should hold itself in its actions *qua* community to a higher moral standard than that to which it could prudently hold its citizens in their actions *qua* individuals. And a recognition that attention to love beyond justice better corresponds to the common good of human dignity underlies the reservations John Paul has developed concerning capital punishment, as I understand his argument (#56, with its use of the *Catechism* #2267; cf. #9, 27, 40).^{xxx} In this and closely related matters at least, John Paul calls the political community to act with love.

There remains room, in a politics oriented toward beauty, for political appeals pointing to the dangerous consequences, for all people, that result when we fail to protect some human lives. These consequences include not only the famous "slippery slope" but also physical and psychological harm to women and others, and the destruction of human relationships. Such consequences must, however, be presented as signs and effects of the disruption by violations of human life of the order of justice and love that is the common good. Appeals of this kind have as a necessary, positive counterpart appeals to the beauty of a society in which the integrity of persons and relationships is safeguarded. Women, uniquely able to know the beauty of motherhood (as well as the wounds inflicted by abortion), are irreplaceable as teachers in these matters (#99).

The characterization of a politics that seeks beauty as a "politics of friends" should not be taken to suggest that spirited argument concerning what is good and the resolve prudently to enact and enforce just laws are inappropriate. "Divisiveness" is dangerous to the imposed peace of the classical liberal social contract, but true political friendship will not put "getting along" before honest confrontation of even potentially "divisive" issues like social issues in general or life-issues in particular. The root of friendship is not so much warm feelings as it is partnership in pursuit of true goodness. One does not ignore, but rather tries to supplement and remedy, one's friends' shortcomings in that pursuit. Good feelings are a response to such help, not a substitute for it.^{xxxi}

John Paul gives the political "system" of democracy special treatment. He says, "If today we see an almost universal consensus with regard to the value of democracy, this is to be considered a positive 'sign of the times,' as the Church's Magisterium has frequently noted." But consistent with what has been elaborated concerning politics, he goes on to add that "the value of democracy stands or falls with the values which it embodies and promotes. Of course, values such as the dignity of every human person, respect for inviolable and inalienable human rights, and the adoption of the 'common

good' as the end and criterion regulating political life are certainly fundamental and not to be ignored" (#70). Democracy, then, must consist in common deliberation about what laws will respond to the invitation of beauty.^{xxxii} But democracy is to be especially valued among possible means to the end of instantiating the values that constitute a society that serves the common good—such that one can speak of a putative movement toward democracies as "positive." That is, if attention to beauty is a criterion for right means to an end, democracy is an especially fitting "means."

Now, the presuppositions of classical liberalism make it difficult to explain the value of democracy. If politics is enforcement of peace, it is unclear that democracy will necessarily be the most efficient means to this end. Presumably, consent being the criterion whereby peace is chosen over war and whereby the details of the peace are justified, any form of government to which consent is given will be equally to be valued. There is nothing in principle better about a form that legislates by popular consent than a form wherein, say, a monarch, to whose office consent has been given, legislates.^{xxxiii} If, on the other hand, politics is the establishment of the right order or beauty in relations among citizens that is the common good, as well as (and ontologically prior to being) an instrument for pacification, then one can argue that where democracy is possible, it is most fitting. My participation in the search for the beauty in which my life in society is to be a participation is especially congruent. My life of ordered freedom will then express the potentialities of the human person under God.

PRO-LIFE POLITICS AND EVANGELICAL RENEWAL

Pope John Paul writes, "Like the yeast which leavens the whole measure of dough (cf. *Mt* 13:33), the Gospel is meant to permeate all cultures and give them life from within, so that they may express the full truth about the human person and about human life" (#95). Insofar as a culture "expresses" truth or falsehood through politics, this implies the necessity of a politics itself grounded in the truth about the human person. This truth includes our natural communion with one another. Nobility or beauty is not attained at the expense of others but in solidarity, including respect for innocent life that refuses directly to take such life and that seeks to nurture it. This same truth therefore implies a politics that is a common search for the beauty of solidarity.

The pro-life movement must take account of this and teach this. We must not fall into the trap of arguing for respect for the right to life as an instrumental good, which is false, and by which we undermine ourselves. "To be actively pro-life," John Paul teaches, "is to contribute to the *renewal of*

society through the promotion of the common good" (#101). Political action, while "taking into account what is realistically attainable" (#90), must never obscure the common good of the right to life by encouraging members of society to continue to view one another, especially the vulnerable, as enemies.

Renewal of society and its political dimension is, finally, inseparable from the "evangelization" whereby the love of mother for unborn child, man and woman for aged parent, family and friend for the sick and disabled, and each for each at each stage of life, comes to be celebrated as "Good News."

NOTES

i. The relationship between the encyclicals becomes especially clear in *Evangelium Vitae's* ch. 3 on "God's Holy Law." John Paul begins this chapter with reference to the story of Jesus' encounter with the rich young man, the same story upon which ch. 1 of *Veritatis Splendor* is an extensive meditation. The story is used to explain the relationship between the gift of law and the gift of life. Concluding *EV* ch. 3 (#75), John Paul explicitly cites *VS* #81-82 on the meaning of exceptionless negative precepts.

ii. In this respect too *Evangelium Vitae* takes up *Veritatis Splendor*, cf. *VS* #97 and 99, which are cited in *EV* #70. Treatment of such other magisterial documents on socio-economic issues as those of John Paul, the Second Vatican Council, and earlier popes, which reflect the same principles, is beyond my scope.

iii. Concerning this approach, cf. the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1901: "Regimes whose nature is contrary... to the fundamental rights of persons cannot achieve the common good..." (emphasis added).

iv. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q.96, a.2.

v. For the social contract, see especially Hobbes' *Leviathan*, part 2, ch. 18. More precisely, Hobbes speaks of a "covenant," but this is a species of "contract" (part 1, ch. 14). Cf. John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, ch. 8, #97, 99. The liberalism that influenced the American founders was mediated by Locke.

David L. Schindler ("Christological aesthetics and *Evangelium Vitae*: Toward a definition of liberalism" in *Communio* 22 [1995] 193-224) argues that the liberal political culture to which John Paul is responding has as its point of departure from a Christian perspective "the loss of contact with God's wise design" of which the pope speaks (*EV* #22). This gives rise to a rupture between "form and love," which are in reality united as beauty. Schindler criticizes even the principles of the American founding on this basis.

My exegesis and conclusions overlap greatly with Schindler's. I shall add two main things. First, I shall give attention to the roots of contractarian liberalism to identify with greater specificity how liberalism's technological approach to the world, discussed by Schindler, departs from John Paul's principles in the political sphere. Second, I shall show that those principles are not peculiarly Christian. Justice already

gives beauty to form. Liberalism loses contact not only with the Persons of the Triune God, but, as the pope precisely says, even with that God's "wise design." John Paul affirms that the Gospel of life "*can ... be known in its essential traits by human reason*" (#29, emphasis in the original; other references to reason's ability to discern good and evil regarding human life are found in ch. 3 and summarized in #77). Therefore, liberalism is anti-Christian for the reason that it opposes a vision that is presupposed by authentic Christianity.

At the same time, Christians know that God's "wise design" includes the economy of salvation, including revelation. Central to John Paul's message is that justice is but the beginning of love. One of his favorite texts from the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes* #24), teaches that persons find themselves only by making gifts of themselves. *Evangelium Vitae* is informed by this principle (#96 cites *Gaudium et Spes* explicitly, but other allusions abound throughout). And this love is known only in Christ (#29, 51).

Beauty therefore finds its full explanation and perfection in Christianity. Herein lies the importance of evangelization and of "Christological aesthetics." John Paul has gone so far as to speak of the inadequacy of justice apart from love in the form of mercy (*Dives in Misericordia* ["Rich in Mercy," 1980] #12). One might consider this a special case of our inability to attain knowledge of saving truth apart from revelation, except "after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.1, a.1).

vi. To cite but one example from a classic text of the movement, one finds this as a strand of the argument in Dr. and Mrs. J. C. Willke's *Abortion: Questions and Answers* (Cincinnati: Hayes, 1985) 3-4, 7-9, 175-76; cf. 225-26ff. To note that there is a certain appeal to self-interest in the Willkes' (or anyone else's) argument for restriction of the practice of abortion is in no way to suggest that their opposition to that practice is selfishly motivated.

vii. Cf. the *Catechism* #1869: "Sins give rise to social situations and institutions that are contrary to the divine goodness. 'Structures of sin' are the expression and effect of personal sins. They lead their victims to do evil in their turn."

viii. In his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* ("The Redeemer of Man," 1979), John Paul emphasizes the need for solidarity in Christ if the modern world is not to threaten humanity with subjection (#16). Here too the Christological focus upon which Schindler ("Christological Aesthetics") concentrates is elaborated. At the same time, working from another of his favorite texts from *Gaudium et Spes* (#22, referring to the revelation of the human person in the revelation of God's love), John Paul shows that the solidarity Christ brings about is a response to the aspirations of the human spirit (#7-12).

ix. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, part 1, ch. 14.

x. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, part 1, ch. 14.

xi. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, part 1, ch. 13.

xii. Russell Hittenger has observed that, seemingly in view of this, *Evangelium Vitae* evinces a return to a cautious approach to democracy like that taken by 19th and earlier 20th century popes ("The Gospel of Life: A Symposium" in *First Things* 56 [Oct. 1995] 33-35). As we shall see, "caution" is not incompatible with a recognition

of value.

The American founding presupposes the problematic conception of democracy herein described. According to the defense of the Constitution in *The Federalist Papers*, "The diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate, is... an insuperable obstacle to a uniformity of interests. The protection of these faculties is the first object of government" (#10). The authors' talk of "rights" must be understood in the context of the Lockean goal of mediating between competitors for property. Rights are the maximum feasible expressions of autonomy, and in fact are given up as necessary to the government (#2). The authors also speak of "the public good." This is primarily the peace without which property is intolerably insecure. It is because the peace of a stable democracy is rendered precarious by the power of factions that the founders turned to the contrivance of an extended republic. They could not envisage transcending a "science of politics" looking only to "efficacy" (#9).

xiii. Cf. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, part 2, ch. 18: Those who will not obey the sovereign place themselves back in the "state of war" and may "justly be destroyed." Locke's *Second Treatise* presents the appearance of comparatively moderate traditionalism. Most specifically, Locke says that one's property may not be taken (ch. 11, #138-39).

But this does not exclude taxes, the sole criterion for the acceptability of which is the majority's consent (#140). Underlying this is the principle that one who joins the social contract thereby "submits to the community those possessions, which he has, or shall acquire" (ch. 8, #120). More broadly, in the community one has "only so much [power over others] as the law of nature gave him" (ch. 11, #135); yet this is much power indeed, for the same "law of nature" that proscribes violations of others entitles anyone to decide and undertake to punish anyone else to the extent one feels necessary for one's own self-preservation (ch. 2, #6-8). In the end, whatever one thinks of Straussian exegeses in general, Leo Strauss is probably right that Locke is more polite, but more revolutionary, than Hobbes. (The judgment that Locke is *more* revolutionary owes to the centrality of labor or striving in Locke's conception of the good life.) See *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953) 220-51.

xiv. This analysis replicates—and the formation of my own thoughts is much indebted to—the analysis presented by James M. Rhodes in "Variations on a Theme by Hobbes," a response to a panel on political obligation at the Midwest regional meeting of the American Political Science Association (Chicago, 1988). The problem of the calculation to which I have referred as essential to classical liberal politics, and which is likely to rule the unborn out of the law's protective sphere, is a special case of the problem Rhodes discussed, wherein utility calculation simply cannot give rise to political obligation.

xv. This is the "postliberal" approach of which Schindler ("Christological Aesthetics," 208) speaks. The consequence of liberal politics that is postliberalism's point of departure is explicated clearly by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: "The one who dares to undertake to establish a people ought to feel that he is, so to speak, in a position to change human nature; to transform each individual, who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole, into part of a larger whole, from which this individual receives in some way his life and his being... to substitute a partial and moral existence for the physical and independent existence which we have all received from

nature" (*On the Social Contract*, book 2, ch. 7; my translation).

The status of this "partial and moral existence" would seem to be ambiguous at best. Friedrich Nietzsche therefore contended that "we need a critique of moral values.... What if, in the 'good,' there even lay a symptom of retrogression, indeed a danger, a temptation, a poison, a narcotic, through which, perhaps, the present lived at the expense of the future?" (*Genealogy of Morals*, preface #6, my translation). Nietzsche was concerned that willed self-destruction (*Genealogy*, esp. essay 1, #13; essay 2, #16-17) was replacing willed self-transcendence such as that attained by his ersatz "savior" Zarathustra (cf. *Genealogy*, essay 2, #24-25 and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, esp. part 1, "Zarathustra's Prologue" #2-4; "On the Three Metamorphoses"). This is *inter alia* a rejection of (Judeo-)Christianity (*Genealogy*, essay 1, #7-8, 14-16; *essat* 2, #20-22) along with all "trans-earthly hopes" (*Zarathustra*, part 1, "Prologue," #3).

xvi. The species of the beautiful (*kalon*), Aristotle explains, are "order and due proportion and boundedness" (*taxis kai symmetria kai to hōrismenon*, *Metaphysics* 1078a36-b1; all references to Aristotle are to the Oxford texts; translations are mine).

These seem to suggest, respectively, right relation of parts to whole, of parts to each other, and of whole to larger whole. Hence the *kalon* encompasses at the same time both a being's internal order and its relationship to other beings. Both stand or fall together. To the extent that my relations to you in disposition and action are not beautifully constituted, neither am I of myself beautifully constituted.

xvii. Aristotle says that a courageous person will endure pains "for the sake of the beautiful (*tou kalou*); for this is the perfection of excellence (*telos tēs aretēs*)" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1115b12-13). St. Thomas Aquinas does not speak of beauty in this context. However, his understanding of the realities involved can be shown to be the same as Aristotle's. In summary, virtue denotes a perfection and therefore goodness, which requires conformity to the rule of (practical) reason, which apprehends goodness. But goodness as form, that is, as cognitively apprehended, is beauty. See *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.5, a.4; I-II, q.55, aa.1,3; q.64, a.1; q.94, aa.2,3.

xviii. Deliberation, Aristotle says, involves consideration of "the most efficient and most beautiful (*kallista*)" of means to an end (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1112b17; I am grateful to Darrell Dobbs for bringing the importance of this passage to my attention). And prudence is the excellence of the intellectual faculty of deliberation. But in order for prudent deliberation to make right our movement toward an end, it is necessary that our aim or sight be made right by ethical excellence: *hē men gar aretē ton skopon poiei orthon, hē de phronēsis ta pros touton* (1144a7-9; cf. 1144a29-b1).

xix. These contentions imply that just actions toward a person who does evil will be different from just actions toward a comparatively innocent person. This underlies what has come to be known as "retributive justice." The pope makes implicit reference to this principle in his discussion of capital punishment (#56). He affirms that the "primary purpose" of punishment is "to redress the disorder caused by the offense" (quoting the *Catechism*), or, apparently equivalently, to "redress the violation of personal and social rights" entailed in a crime (John Paul's own words). Relative to this purpose of punishment, its utility for public order and safety and its rehabilitative value are secondary. An account of punishment not acknowledging the reality and primacy of retributive justice would make punishment merely an act of use—an

expression of the culture of death.

xx. For a fuller treatment of this, see Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (New York: Random House, 1963) 24-37.

xxi. Hadley Arkes ("The Splendor of Truth: A Symposium" in *First Things* 39 [Jan. 1994] 27) writes, "Many students of Leo Strauss, and a flock of Aristotelians, may suffer trauma over the references in [*Veritatis Splendor*] to truths that are categorical—unyielding and uncompromising." The same teaching grounds *Evangelium Vitae*, and a further comment is in order. Strauss (*Natural Right and History*, 157-64) interpreted Aristotle's statement about the mutability of natural right (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1134b29-30) to exclude such truths. As I hope to have made clear, Aristotle's own understanding of the foundation of virtue or excellence makes possible exceptionless prohibitions. For an interpretation of the mutability of natural right that clarifies its compatibility with such prohibitions, see James M. Rhodes, "Right by Nature" in *Journal of Politics* 53 (1991) 317-38.

xxii. A debate about the meaning of natural law has been taking place. A helpful account of the issues that explains and defends the contentions of the "new" theory of Germain Grisez et al. is that of Robert P. George, "Recent Criticism of Natural Law Theory" in *The University of Chicago Law Review* 55 (1988) 1371-1429. The claims in *Evangelium Vitae* are, implicitly, claims concerning natural law, and might profitably be tentatively located with reference to this debate. The view that "our (practical) knowledge of human good(s) is methodologically prior to our (speculative) knowledge of human nature" (George, "Recent Criticism," 1416) may be compatible with John Paul's, though perhaps one should say "coeval with" instead of "prior to." More problematic, however, is the new theory's isolation and identification as pre-moral of those goods, and what strikes me as its deontological accent on rationality as a criterion for moral action (George, "Recent Criticism," 1396ff). Human perfection is something that, for John Paul, can be approached, and that can be intellectually discerned insofar as it is beautiful. This perfection and its advancement is the standard for moral goodness. Hence, perfected human nature as bringing together being (form, to use Schindler's term) and goodness (justice and love) is a moral category, and arguing from nature is not arguing from a bare "is" to an "ought."

xxiii. *Proterai gar eisi tōn dynamōn hai energeiai kai hai praxeis kata ton logon* (*De Anima* 415a18-20). Consistently, Aristotle does not call the study of the soul a deductive science (*epistēmē*) that proceeds from *a priori* principles, but rather an "inquiry" (*historian*, 402a4) into what potentialities of soul would explain the activities we observe.

xxiv. Cf. Pieper, *Leisure*, 56-64; and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986) 61-75.

xxv. Cf. Joseph F. Chorprenning, "The Holy Family as Icon and Model of the Civilization of Love" in *Communio* 22 (1995) 77-98.

xxvi. This is the worst-case scenario, and in fact there are signs of conversion as well. The phenomenon has also been noted elsewhere; John Mallon reports ("Catholic Essentials" in *Crisis* 14 [April 1996] 8) that the pope and *Evangelium Vitae* have brought about "[a] resurgence of interest in human life" in Italy.

xxvii. The existence of justice as such a common good, and our ability to discern what is just, in fact underlie Aristotle's argument that "man is by nature a political animal" (*Politics* 1252b27-53a39). Moreover it, not consent, is what makes just laws binding in conscience (cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q.96, a.4; also q.93, a.3 and q.95, a.2; and the *Catechism* #1902-03).

xxviii. Aristotle says that "a young man is not a proper listener to the political, for he is inexperienced in actions of life, but reasonings (*hoi logoi*) [about laws for human action] proceed from these and concern these" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a2-4). Remarkably, Aristotle speaks of *listening* (*a fortiori*, political speaking is presumably excluded as well). The one who has not become aware, through experience, of the beauty that is the principle of political discourse literally will not know the first thing about politics. And even listening to political discourse will be dangerous, not merely unproductive, for such a person. Not knowing what he does not know, he will come fundamentally to misconceive what he is hearing and therefore the nature of politics.

xxix. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1141b23-24ff.

xxx. For more on this, see William L. Portier, "Are We Really Serious When We Ask God to Deliver Us From War? The Catechism and the Challenge of Pope John Paul II" in *Communio* 23 (1996) 47-63.

xxxi. Aristotle speaks of friendship appearing in proportion to the justice of the constitution of a political community (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1161a10-11ff; cf. 1158b13-14). The possibility of friendship between ruler and ruled is consistent with the more general principle that the good do not let their friends err (1159b6-7).

xxxii. Alain Woodrow's criticisms of *Evangelium Vitae* ("The Pope's Challenge to Western Democracy" in *The Tablet* 249 [1995] 448, 450) fail to take any account of these conclusions.

xxxiii. Thus, according to Hobbes (*Leviathan*, part 2, ch. 19), monarchy is most efficient. Locke suggests a preference for democracy (*Second Treatise*, ch. 2, #13; ch. 7, #94; ch. 8, #97-99), but accepts any form of government to which consent is given (ch. 10, #132). The Declaration of Independence seems to make consent necessary only at the stage at which a government is "instituted," wherefore it was necessary to establish "a long train of abuses" to condemn the British monarchy, as Martin Diamond has pointed out (*The Founding of the Democratic Republic* [Itasca: F. E. Peacock, 1981] 3-6).