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CONFRONTING THE MORAL DISORDER OF OUR TIME

I.

We look back to 1989 with the momentous changes in the Communist world. We have almost begun to forget why the Communists were a threat. These changes were difficult to explain by the ordinary run of social sciences, presumably capable, as they think, of seeing social movements in their "causes". No one, in fact, predicted these transformations in any really convincing sense. Everyone acknowledges, sometimes reluctantly, moreover, that the one player in this event who influenced it most was John Paul II. The actions of unique individuals, as personalist metaphysics understands, always come unexpectedly, surprisingly from outside the theories. Not infrequently, the Pope warns of a "reductionism" in scientific method which implies, improperly, to be sure, that if something is not covered by a theory, it cannot exist. "No statistic aiming at a quantitative measurement of faith ... will get to the bottom of the matter," John Paul II told Vittorio Messori in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (Knopf, p. 102).

In *Centesimus Annus*, the Holy Father gave us his account of these extraordinary days. "The events of 1989," he wrote, "are an example of the success of willingness to negotiate and of the Gospel spirit in the face of an adversary determined not to be bound by moral principles. These events are a warning to those who, in the name of political realism, wish to banish law and morality from the political arena" (*C. A.*, #25). We ask: "For whom do these events" serve as a warning about the dangers of banishing "law and morality"? Surely, the answer today must be mostly for ourselves.

We like to think that the end of formal Communist power in Europe made it clear to everybody the validity and possibility of the moral and political relationships that must exist for human well-being to flourish. Paradoxically, mankind, when confronted threateningly with extreme tyranny, often sees more clearly how it ought to live than it does in peace and prosperity. We cannot but be struck, however, with the quietness with which Communism ended, something almost more surprising than the fact that it went at all. Till its end, we ourselves were almost convinced, perhaps by Communist propaganda itself, that the only way to overcome violence is with violence. The events, however, did not confirm this expectation.

What has happened in the meantime, on the immediate way to the Third Millennium, is that we have not learned the right lessons about ourselves, or perhaps, it is better to say, that we have not *chosen* to learn the right lessons. We live in an era of the primacy of political will over reason and science. Ideas that subsequently undermined basic human institutions and goods, particularly the family, have flourished in democracies, wherein, ironically, they were chosen, not imposed by any alien power. Indeed, we are at a point wherein various forms of legislative, executive, and judicial rulings, passed in accordance with due constitutional procedures in almost every free country, have commanded into existence a concept of man that is, in its pre-suppositions, thoroughly anti-Christian and anti-natural law. No written constitution has proved itself capable of withstanding the subverting forces of modern relativism, no matter how firmly its principles were said to be rooted in unchanging reason or nature or nature's God.

The seeds of this increasing "democratic tyranny," as the Holy Father has frequently called it, were already in the logic of modern European thought before Marx ever came on the scene. In retrospect, it begins to look like the significance of Communism, with its dire military threats, was that it served as a kind of temporary brake that prevented subversive notions of man, family, and the

state from having their deleterious political effect. Now that this brake or restraint is gone, we are free to carry out schemes of population control, abortion, euthanasia, fetal experimentation, homosexual "marriages" and adoptions, and general moral hedonism on a scale never before imagined. Whether we do this "experimenting" under the banner of ecological doom, overpopulation, or simply a concept of freedom related to nothing but itself, we choose to see no natural order or direction to anything in human nature that would indicate *what it is* and how it best functions. Since we have no criterion of what is "the good" for mankind, we consider ourselves free to experiment as we will. We wish to produce a man who will be "himself," autonomous, in whom nothing exists that is said to be "imposed" or "willed" from a source outside of himself, particularly by God.

II.

The frequency with which the Holy Father has pointed out the extent of martyrdom in this declining century, right up to the senseless, brutal murder by Muslim extremists of the seven Trappist Monks and one Dominican Bishop in Algeria in May and August of 1996, should not pass without notice. The Pope wishes to update the Martyrology to include the martyrs of the 20th Century, perhaps the most bloody Century in human history -- something that always shocks us, when we realize that it is our Century.

Christians themselves seem indifferent to the persecution of their fellow Christians throughout the world, almost as if they have ceased to think either that brotherhood binds or that their own religious liberty is important or connected with that of fellow believers in other lands. Cultural relativism has led many to think we ought not even to be trying to propagate Christianity, for that implies, it is said, that some "cultures" are not complete in their given historic dimensions. Pluralism is often taken to mean that there are many paths to salvation that do not need to be open to

or altered by the Christian revelation in any manner. Hence, there is no need for a missionary Church.

Both the Holy Father's *Redemptoris Missio* and *Ut Unum Sint* are directed to differing aspects of this same perplexing problem: How to recognize the truth in other cultures and religion? How to present what other polities, cultures, and religions do not have in a free and honorable way without being subject, in turn, to civil suppression and popular pressure or without being accused of trying to "impose" something alien on others? No obligation or opportunity at least to listen to the claims of revelation is acknowledged. The "Good News" is denied religious liberty.

A culture increasingly intolerant of the basic truths of Christianity, of even allowing them to be accurately and freely stated, combined with an indifference to what happens to Christians elsewhere in the world, explains the Holy Father's emphasis that freedom of religion is and must remain the *first* duty of the state to define accurately and protect. Thus, in his response on receiving the Credentials of the new Ambassador to the Vatican from the Republic of Egypt, the Holy Father stated: "The Holy See cannot state strongly enough that the right to religious freedom, and the corresponding juridically guaranteed respect for this right, are the source and foundation of truly peaceful coexistence. Moreover, it is not sufficient that the commitment to ensuring such freedom be expressed: it must influence in a real and practical way the actions of political and religious leaders, and the behavior of believers themselves" (O. 4, 1996; *OR*, English, O. 9, 1996, p. 5). The Holy Father is aware that almost everyone claims to respect religious freedom as an abstract position but very many deny it or fail to allow it in practice. He is aware of mobs that close down churches and schools or judges that make practice of religion severely circumscribed by the state.

III.

Almost from the beginning of his pontificate, the Holy Father has been preparing for the Third Millennium. His *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, in 1991, is a more immediate preparation for precisely what the Holy Father takes to be a religious event in the order of salvation history, and not merely a secular changing of dates from the 1000's to the 2000's. While all the current intellectual confusions variously known as modernism, post-modernism, deconstructionism, cultural relativism, doctrinal pluralism, and their various cross currents have dominated the visible intellectual scenes, John Paul II has steadily and carefully accumulated a wide-ranging and coherent body of teaching that, remarkably enough, represents the precise antithesis of the cultural movements of our era. Every significant aspect of Christian teaching and practice has been clarified, ordered, and presented in a coherent form, accessible to anyone willing to think on it. This papal thought shows itself familiar with philosophy of the ideologies or systems that are arrayed against or critical of it. Likewise, as the Holy Father mentioned at the publication of the *General Catechism of the Catholic Church*, this coherent presentation of what the Church holds of itself was intended "for every individual who asks us to give an account of the hope that is in us and wants to know what the Catholic Church believes." The Church wants to be properly understood by those who seek to know what it stands for, something it believes possible for everyone of normal intelligence and good will.

The significance of this remarkable body of teaching, reflection, and discourse ought not to pass without notice. The two documents that penetrate to the heart of the disorders of modern civilization to place the Church at odds with it are *Veritatis Splendor* and *Evangelium Vitae*. That is, the Holy Father precisely directs himself to the denial of truth as a principle and to the claim that human life, who lives and who dies, is subject solely to human will. As the precise opposition between Catholic teaching and secular practice has become more visible and acute, such that so

many basic human decencies are rendered meaningless by practice and law, it is well to ask if it is possible for our era to pass without great violence and persecution, if present anti-life and skeptical trends continue? Can, in other words, there be another "quiet" revolution that, almost by a change of heart, is capable of addressing itself to the terrible practices that we generally refuse to call anything else but by the noble name of "rights"?

We must reluctantly realize that the noble word "right" in many contexts today can be a most dangerous word. Pretending that this word has no intellectual ambiguity to it causes enormous civil confusions. With some historical and philosophical care, no doubt, the word "right" can be given a valid theoretical and practical meaning. The Holy Father uses the word with care, but finds himself constantly having to explain what he does not mean by the word. Nine times out of ten, however, as the word is used both academically and popularly today, it does not have a recognizably legitimate meaning, however much we might like to think it so, as it can be a useful word.

The word "right" does not mean what we normally think it does in Catholic circles wherein it is a claim to or an aspect of something intrinsic to human dignity, say, life, property, or speech. Rather the word "right", as it is used in practice, comes from at least Hobbes. "Right" in this sense basically means, "what I want," or, in a civil context, "what the state wants." This "what-I-want" is what the word means for most people and evidently most legislators and judges. This will-aspect of the word "right" is also why there is no "argument" about it. If "right" means "what I want" and I "want" something, then this "what-I-want" is the content of my "right." For this reason, it is perfectly coherent for people to speak of a "right to abortion," something that seems simply contradictory. To "respect" the "right" of another, then, simply means allowing one's own "will" to achieve its object.

We can be appalled at this usage of the word, of course. But it should not surprise us that this terminology is a perfectly logical phrase if we root "right" in "will", as has happened since the word came into early modern usage. Clearly, "the right to life" and the "right to abortion" are contradictory positions from a natural law viewpoint. Yet, there is nothing contradictory in a "will" based position. One day we will the position that "right to life" is inalienable. The next day we will the opposite, that it is not. Since law is what we "will" collectively, nothing unusual appears, no contradiction is visible. In this system, both "life" and "abortion" are "rights." What decides which will prevail is not some criterion of reason or *what is*, but what is willed at the moment. We appoint the state, as the locus of our will, to make the decision. So, on the basis of this theory, we have no basis, other than our own opposite and equally arbitrary wills, to object to a law that decrees a certain class of human life, say, the unborn or the old or the deformed, can claim nothing of their own intrinsic reality as a limit on the will of the state to act against them if it chooses.

IV.

Is there any way back to an understanding of will that sees it as a principle of the object, of the good that is simply there? A useful way to see the main issue is, for the sake of argument, to take the Holy Father at his word, in his repeated teachings. Namely, let us ask ourselves what his opposition to this anti-truth or anti-life movement in contemporary law or practice means? Let us take the teaching on abortion. What does our society look like if what the Pope teaches is true? We understand that on the "will-rights" theory, the exercise of the "right" to abortion has nothing to do with what happens in an abortion. The unborn child is treated as if it does not exist. What matters is the "right" of the one that wills.

The Holy Father, it is well-known, has taught a thousand times that each human life is sacred from conception. Each human life came into existence by the direct hand of God. As such it lies

outside of human moral power to do anything but protect and foster it. Civil law and individual moral virtue should converge to protect and enhance this life. We also know that, in principle, no child should be born except within a family, of a father and mother, who will love it and take care of it. We know this preferred condition is not in fact always the case. When it is not, institutions and procedures as closely allied to the normal situation, often arising from supernatural energies, should be in place. Each human life so begun at conception is protected, even in abortion-ridden societies, by the commandment, "Thou Shalt Not Kill." This prohibition is the foundation or first minimal step in any coherent "right to life" and any just civil order. *Prius est esse.*

However, we all live in societies in which, for the past quarter of a century or more, hundreds of thousands and millions of human beings have already been legally and systematically chosen to be killed each year. This killing of unborn infants is protected by the force of law; it is not "illegal", however immoral. People have a "right" (a "will-right") to abortion as defined by the state. Practically every political society, with varying degrees of limitations, follows this practice. To point this situation out is simply to state the facts. We regularly kill unborn human beings and, in several jurisdictions, we begin to allow doctors to "assist" the old to kill themselves -- something that Paul VI already saw in the logic of the anti-life position.

In terms of the Holy Father's firm statement about each life sacred from conception, what do these facts of so many human killings mean? At first sight, it might mean merely a controversy about the definition of life. To some degree, the issue has been argued in these terms, as a kind of moral puzzle. But from the point of view of science, we must state that the Pope is quite right, not religiously but simply scientifically, when he affirms that human life begins "from the moment of conception." There is no conflict between the Church and science here. The only conflict is between the Church and science on one side and, on the other, a voluntarist politics that claims not to

be bound by any limits but its own contrivance. The only human lives that will be protected by the state are those it chooses to protect, however it chooses. The state no longer protects or claims to protect "all human life" simply because it is human life.

V.

What this means is that *de facto* we live in a period of great and widespread legal slaughter of our own kind. The fact of this widespread human killing is a simple thing to document, as is our wide-spread moral indifference to it. Regimes that permit and foster this killing of the most innocent of our kind, however, bear a great and accumulated moral guilt in the souls of its leaders and individual citizens who select them. Indeed, we must sometimes ask ourselves, what is the meaning of this great slaughter and suffering of millions killed before birth? It cannot simply be a nothing. God perhaps forgives, but He does not forget until He forgives. Nor should we. And forgiveness is not possible without an explicit, clear acknowledgement of what it is we have done.

The reason why this killing continues is that we do not choose to cease doing those things that make abortion an option. Technology may very well, with various deadly pills or lasers, reduce the numbers of abortion after the first few weeks. Making abortion more invisible, less an industry, would possibly reduce the political issue. Yet, we recall that the widespread use of, say, condoms or other devices, was supposed to reduce abortions also. Evidently, it did not do so as the number of abortions per capita has remained almost constant, a fact that should lead us to suspect that what causes abortions is not "mechanical" or "medical" in the first place. Very few pregnancies today occur because the begetters did not know how to prevent them by artificial means.

In the course of the past half century, most modern nations have on their collective consciences the accumulated guilt of tens of millions of abortions, of terminated human lives. Really there is no way to deny that this slaughter has happened. Each of our societies is missing

hundreds of thousands and millions of human lives, potential sources of knowledge, generosity, wealth. We can either continue killing or stop it. If we continue it, as we seem likely to do, we must convince ourselves that this slaughter is nothing serious. To kill an unborn infant is, it is said, to do it a favor, to prevent it from being "unloved" or "poor" or "unwanted." Ironically, it is the Church that primarily teaches that each child should be "loved", "cared for", and "wanted." It is, no doubt, a serious thing to go about bringing children into the world without these expectations being looked into. But we cannot love, care for, or want what we kill.

To confront the moral disorder of our time, we must admit to ourselves what it is we do. We need to be reminded, gently but firmly, of our deeds. This living, moral clarification is one of the services that the Holy Father has provided to our era. Beyond this, we must see that what we do is brought into reality by our choices. This source means that it can be likewise willed out of reality by a reversal of our choices. The first step is to know, the second to acknowledge, the third to repent and restore the right order. The Holy Father's persistent calmness before Communism and his patient teaching of the truth about life are based on his confidence that, ultimately, evil has no force, that it is a nothing, that it can quietly disappear if we choose the truth, as he says in *Veritatis Splendor*, if we choose life, as he says in *Evangelium Vitae*. Such choices can make us free and enable us to bear the terrible civil burdens that we refuse to acknowledge to have resulted from our choices.