RESTORING FAITH IN CULTURE

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"[C]ulture *is* the faith *made visible*, and being visible is the heart of the faith in the God who made himself visible in Christ."

What is the relationship between faith and culture? If one takes one's bearings from conventional expressions, one could get the impression that these stand in tension, if not outright opposition, with each other: to refer to a person as a "cultural Christian" or "cultural Catholic" is meant to convey the sense of a faith that is now dead, if it ever had been alive to begin with. One means that the person has grown up with the "outward trappings" of a Christian existence—perhaps he was baptized and had a church wedding; perhaps he attended Mass with his family growing up because "that's just what one does on Sundays"; perhaps he went to a Catholic school as a child and has a medal of St. Benedict, the patron saint of protection, on his key chain—but never internalized any of these things, affirming them as his own, making them existentially relevant to the actual shape of his life, so to speak. When large populations, such as the majority of modern European nations, evince a merely "cultural Catholicism" in this negative sense, the great cathedrals in these lands become little more than impressive museums, and if the people of these nations

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continue to retain even a fierce pride in these cultural treasures, it is generally not because of the faith that once engendered them.

Now, "dead faith" is certainly a very real and widespread phenomenon, but the conventional interpretation of this phenomenon as being cultural *rather than* real or authentic is profoundly inadequate. It assumes a significant misunderstanding of what culture is, of what faith is, and of the nature of their relationship, and so it implies what would amount to a perverse response to the phenomenon. Instead of helping to bring faith back to life, the articulation of "cultural Christianity" offered above, if accepted, would in fact definitively bury what has been left as dead.

What we wish to argue in the brief reflection that follows is that to the extent a faith is cultural it remains alive; the artifacts of a culture are a kind of embodied memory of a living faith. Moreover, faith itself is something objective and real before it is a subjective appropriation of that reality. Therefore, to restore the life of one's personal faith does not require some sort of retreat from the "outer trappings" into a principally interior reality, but in the first place it requires a deepening of one's love for these artifacts, practices, and social forms, a deepening of one's affection for and attachment to Christian culture.

In order to show this, we will first argue that a culture in general is not just "outward trappings" but the embodiment of meaning, and even more specifically the embodiment of the search for God and the celebration of God. Second, we will argue that, especially in Christianity, faith is not principally an interior reality but an inward disposition outwardly manifest, which is to say it is meant to be embodied, not only in one's person or private household but in the world. It is a reality in itself, and not just an inward disposition toward that reality. Finally, we will suggest that, founded as it is on the dimensions of the central Christian mystery—the Incarnation of the Son of God—Christian culture is not just one culture among many human cultures, but, by gathering up the search for God that defines humanity and the descent of God into the flesh of this search, it represents the perfection of human culture simply. In Christianity, faith and culture are so perfectly united as to be *essential* to one another: each expresses the very essence of the other.

I. WHAT IS CULTURE?

A distinction is typically made between "high culture" and "low culture." By "high culture" is meant the noblest achievements of the human spirit, the great works of art and literature, as well as the critical capacity to appreciate these in a due manner. Curiously, high culture touches the extremes of both universality and particularity: on the one hand, at its best it occupies itself with themes and discloses truths that transcend any given age or people. Because of this transcendence of the specificity of a time or place, we naturally tend to associate high culture of this sort with "humanism"—as did, for example, Matthew Arnold.[1] On the other hand, high culture is generally not for all the people but for the so-called elites in a society who have the leisure, the education, and presumably the natural capacities to acquire, if not the talent to produce such cultural monuments, at least the discernment and taste that allow their fitting reception and honor.

In contrast to the more directly literary and artistic sense of "high culture," there is also the "low" form that is studied for example in anthropology and sociology. It is important to note immediately that "low" in this context does not mean "base"; what is intended by this term is not the "mass culture," which emerged as a theme in certain mid to late twentieth-century discussions.[2] This characterization of course tends to be generally negative, indicating either something essentially formless[3] or the more aggressive and *ressentiment*-laden sense of hostility toward all things elite (the "revolt of the masses"[4]). Instead, in anthropology the term is meant in the fundamentally positive sense as

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1. See G. Robert Stange, *Matthew Arnold: The Poet as Humanist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

2. For example, Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance," in *Between Past and Future* (1954; New York: Penguin, 2006); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 2nd ed. (1964; London: Routledge, 1991).

3. Martin Mosebach, *The Heresy of Formlessness: The Roman Liturgy and Its Enemy*, rev. ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2018). In this book, Mosebach is specifically addressing liturgy, but what he says has broader significance for one's interpretation of culture more generally.

4. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, rev. ed. (1929; London: Norton, 1994).

a set of customs, values, stories, and even institutions that define a particular people and give that people its unique flavor, so to speak.[5] Here, we might think of folk art as distinct from fine art, the songs and dances of a particular people as distinct from a *chef d'oeuvre* musical composition or a ballet performance. This form of culture—we will call it "folk" culture rather than "low" culture in order to avoid the negative connotations—is also simultaneously particular and universal, but in quite a different sense from high culture. It is universal in the sense that it belongs to all the people and not just the gifted few; it is particular in the sense that it distinguishes a particular ethnic group from others, rather than being concerned with humanity in a more strictly timeless way.

We would like to suggest that, in addition to this widely recognized distinction, there is a "third," "middle" sense of culture, which holds together the two ends because it shares in what characterizes each. It thus serves to mediate them and keep them from degenerating into corrupt forms: it keeps folk culture from becoming mass culture and high culture from becoming snobbery. This middle sense is the culture that, like folk culture, belongs to a people generally, rather than just to certain individuals, and gives that people a distinctive shape by giving it a particular unity. At the same time, it has a normative aspect; it is not simply what a given ethnic group de facto happens to do or believe but rather requires education and disciplined, intentional formation.[6] This formation involves, among other things, the study of literature and

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5. Christopher Dawson refers to this general sense to characterize what he means by culture in his various discussions (see *The Crisis of Western Education* [1961; Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010], 104). However, it does not seem to capture properly what he has in mind, insofar as the culture that was preserved in the monasteries of Europe is not exactly the "folk culture" of the people but a kind of store of higher learning, even if that is distinct from Matthew Arnold's humanism. Below, we will propose a third sense of culture, which seems to fit Dawson's description more aptly.

6. The word "discipline" comes from the Latin *disciplina*, corresponding to the Greek *mathēsis*, meaning a body of knowledge or a systematic set of rules for learning. These nouns came from the verbs *discere* and *methein*: to learn. The English derivatives offer some insight into the differences between the Roman and the Greek spirit: "discipline" and "mathematics." See Owen Barfield, *History in English Words* (1953; Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Press, 1988), 100.

the contemplation of works of art. In this respect, the middle sense resembles high culture. The reason it requires education is that it concerns a certain ideal of what it means to be a human being, which draws on sources beyond what one might "pick up" from one's immediate surroundings—though of course the modeling of humanity in one's surroundings is essential, as Robert Spaemann has observed.[7] The ideal that governs education is at once moral, in the sense that it represents a kind of outward excellence, that is, *arētē*, or virtue, as noble manners and concern for what is good, and intellectual in the sense that it involves an integrated understanding of the meaning of things, how all things relate to first principles—and ultimately the first principle (God). An ideal of this sort is not produced simply by nature (*physis*) but demands work, training, a whole engagement of human skill, imagination, and intelligence (*nomos*) to bring it about and so enable a person to grow beyond what is naturally given.[8] It is not accidental that the word "culture" as we generally know it was coined by Cicero to explain the Greek sense of philosophy as a training of the whole person, which is why the word "culture" is so closely connected to the Greek word for education, *paideia*.[9]

When one interprets culture along these lines, it becomes evident that this middle sense is in fact the paradigm, the sense that represents the essence of culture. One suspects that the failure to recognize the distinctiveness of this middle sense is one of the reasons we have the fragmenting extremes, which have fallen away in alienation from each other—the mass culture on one side and the cultural elitism on the other, not to mention the increasingly dominant dialectical combination of these in the educated

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7. Robert Spaemann, "Education as an Introduction to Reality," in *A Robert Spaemann Reader: Philosophical Essays on Nature, God, and the Human Person*, ed. and trans. D.C. Schindler and Jeanne Heffernan Schindler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 111–20.

8. To be sure, it is also perfectly natural in the sense that it is human *nature* to give one's nature a spiritualized form. On the essentially analogical meaning of nature that would support this interpretation, see Spaemann, "Nature," in *The Robert Spaemann Reader*, 22–30.

9. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J. E. King, vol. 9, bk. 2 (London: Heinemann, 1927), 159; Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, 2nd ed. (1939; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), xvii; see also the prefatory comment, v.

elite who celebrate mass culture and hold the high expressions of humanity in contempt—and that this is in fact why we can be said simply to have lost any real culture. The reason this middle sense represents the essence of culture is evident in the etymological roots of the word. "Culture" comes from the verb *colere*, meaning "to tend, to raise, to grow." The word "culture" is of course related to the word "cultivate." When Cicero coined the term, he was carrying over (meta-phor) an agricultural concept into the sphere of human development: just as one cultivates a vineyard, which—as Virgil would describe so elegantly a generation after Cicero[10]—involves a great deal of work, some of which is inevitably forceful and even apparently violent, and in any event altogether disciplined, so too one must cultivate the mind or spirit: *cultura animi*. However *natural* culture may be to human beings, in its proper sense it does not come *naturally* but demands a concerted effort. But such formation (*Bildung*) can take place only in view of a form (*Bild*); the movement of growth beyond what is simply given de facto is inevitably a movement toward an ideal, something that does not yet exist, at least in a certain respect, but which presents itself principally not in abstract concepts but in the actuality of properly imaginative thinking in letters and forms, and eventually in practices and things. One thinks here of what Schiller called the "aesthetic education of man" and of Rousseau's epigraph to that work: "Si c'est la raison qui fait l'homme, c'est le sentiment qui le conduit."[11] It is this that we are identifying as the middle, the essential and defining sense of culture: not just the (elite) acquisition of impressive historical knowledge about cultural artifacts but the general and comprehensive formation of persons in light of an ideal of what it most properly means to be human.

The properly general, generated, and generating character of culture becomes evident in the fact that this ideal of human existence is quite concrete and concerns much more

10. See especially Virgil's second georgic in *Georgics*, trans. David Ferry (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), 46–89.

11. "If it is reason that constitutes man, it is feeling that guides him" (Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* [1795; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954]). Schiller develops his theory of education on the premise of an "ideal man," which is simultaneously transcendent and immanent to each living individual.

than imaginative depictions of man; it expresses itself not only in the high works of art or thought but all the way from the top to the very bottom of existence: in food and the style of dress, in music, in adornment, in the forms that constitute the practices of daily life, as well as in the implements of these practices, from the dishes and eating utensils to vessels and tools, buildings, and the layouts of villages, towns, and cities. The point in identifying this as the middle sense of culture holding together the two extremes is to see, on the one hand, that culture is not simply a store of knowledge but a comprehensive way of life and, on the other hand, that this way of life is not just superficial ornamentation or a series of disparate practices but the outward form, so to speak, of an ideal conception of human nature, a distinctive interpretation of reality, of truth, beauty, and goodness. If we think of a particular nation or a people as having a soul, culture is its body. In short, culture is embodied meaning—which implies that culture will tend to disappear whenever the significance of the body is lost and wherever ultimate meaning is marginalized.

Now, this last formulation evokes the work of Christopher Dawson, the great Catholic historian. As Glenn Olsen sums it up, the central insight informing Dawson's historical study is that "culture is embodied religion."[12] Of course, generally speaking, religion itself, as distinct from theology or doctrine, is already embodied: it indicates basically the practices of a people by which the gods are given their due, by which they are honored. The reason Olsen's phrase is not redundant (since religion is already and inevitably embodied) but genuinely illuminating is that it means to extend the embodiment that *is* religion analogously into all the dimensions of human existence that do not immediately seem to be religious. There are particular acts that are explicitly religious, such as ritual sacrifice, and there are other acts, such as washing one's clothes, that do not seem to be immediately directed to honoring the gods. But Dawson's point was that these cannot be so easily juxtaposed: while there is a clear difference between these two—indeed, as the Jewish Sabbath so vividly

12. Glenn W. Olsen, "Why We Need Christopher Dawson," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 115–44.

expresses, the proper worship of God requires an interruption of daily human life[13]—it is a difference within a fundamental unity. The whole of human life, unto its most material and practical dimensions, unfolds inside of an encompassing relation to God, and if that relation is (and must be) honored in discrete acts, those acts nevertheless only serve to make explicit what is implicit always and everywhere in a properly human life.[14] As Dawson puts it, for the ancient human cultures there is no social activity that is not religious, and there is no religious activity that is not in some way socially useful.[15] It is helpful in this context to recall that the word "culture" is etymologically related not only to "cultivation" in the agricultural sense but also to the religious word "cult," referring to worship.[16] It is not just that the religious practice of worship tends to produce a culture[17] but that all of the activities of a culture are analogously, however implicitly, a form of worship. Material culture is the "deposit" of this activity of worship in things: culture is embodied religion. It is therefore impossible finally to separate the sphere of culture from its theological significance. Dawson sums this up nicely:

> We have seen that every social culture is at once a material way of life and a spiritual order. Culture as a common way of life is inseparable from culture as a common tradition of language and thought and a common inheritance of knowledge, and this in turn involves an organized attempt to coordinate human action with the transcendent divine

13. See Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath* (1951; New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005).

14. Thus, even as lowly an activity as washing clothes can be done in a manner that expresses religion through ritual: see for example Homer's description of the washing ritual undertaken by Nausicaa in *The Odyssey*, bk. 6.

15. Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (1948; Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 38–39.

16. See the final chapter of Josef Pieper's famous book, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (1948; South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), 50–60.

17. As Dawson puts it, "However universal and spiritual a religion may be, it can never escape the necessity of becoming incarnated in culture and clothing itself in social institutions and traditions, if it is to exert a permanent influence on human life and behavior" (*Religion and Culture*, 41).

> power which rules the world and on which man's life depends.[18]

II. THE WORD BECAME CULTURE

In his address to the "Representatives from the World of Culture," delivered at that mecca of culture, the city of Paris, in 2008,[19] Benedict XVI recalled the historical significance of Western monasticism, which both preserved the culture from the past in the time of "great cultural upheaval resulting from migrations of peoples and the emerging new political configurations" and generated a new culture, which "slowly took shape out of the old."[20] He explained that this great service to Western civilization happened incidentally, as it were. The monks who entered the monasteries, with the focused and radically disciplined order of life these religious communities enjoined, did not do so directly in order to "save the culture" but instead had a single aim: *quaerere Deum*, the search for God.[21] The monks, we could say, sought to seek God; they sought to gather up the whole of their lives in the pursuit of, and indeed a celebration of already having been found by, God, a pursuit and celebration that thus gave their lives unity and made the otherwise disparate parts of existence meaningful in relation to a life-giving center. But in the light of our discussion above it seems we ought to qualify Benedict's observation: it would be more proper to say that what they sought was *precisely* culture, in an especially concentrated form, because in the end culture itself is the embodiment of the *quaerere Deum*.

To be sure, Benedict himself implicitly makes the same point in his address, but he arrives at it from the other direction, so to speak. As he goes on to explain, it is not at all accidental that the devoted worship of God in the monasteries should have both preserved and generated a culture, because the God thus

18. Ibid., 150.

19. Benedict XVI, "The Origins of Western Theology and the Roots of European Culture," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 298–303.

20. Ibid., 299.

21. Ibid.

worshiped is the Incarnate God, Jesus Christ, the essentially divine person who took on human flesh, that is, human nature and everything it entails, not as an outward disguise but from within. Here we see a perfectly complementary dimension to the one described above: if culture is man's effort, so to speak, to grow (*colere*) beyond himself toward the luminous sphere of the divine, elevating all of his natural activities so that they give due expression to a religious sense in a generally implicit, analogous, and symbolic way, in the Incarnation God himself enters into the flesh, the material reality, of human nature and indeed assumes the altogether historically and culturally concrete human nature he receives in the simultaneously physical and spiritual womb of the Jewish woman, Mary. What we have here is not just an opening up of the earth, which transcends itself into heaven, but an entry of heaven into the innermost heart of the earth. This wonderfully complexifies the meaning of culture in a manner we will explain in section three below.

There is thus a surprising fittingness of the embodiment of specifically Christian faith in culture. Benedict goes on to highlight the Christian recognition of Jesus Christ as the *Word* made flesh. Because he is the one Word, the many words of Scripture represent the uniquely sanctioned access to Christ, the privileged witness to him. But because he is the Word, these words are always relativized to the reality of Christ and his simultaneously historical and theological existence.[22] This implies that the meaning of the Word presented in the words of Scripture exceeds those very words: "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (Jn 21:25, RSVCE).[23] According to Benedict, one of the cultural implications of the Incarnation is the cultivation of literature. To worship Christ, we must learn to read Scripture

22. As *Dei verbum* explains (7–10), this is why the Holy Spirit and the living tradition of the Church are essential to the proper and fruitful reading of Scripture.

23. This is why Christianity is not a "religion of the book," as Islam is, for instance. See Rémi Brague's illuminating observations on this score: *The Legend of the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

well; to read Scripture well requires that we learn to read well.[24] As Jean Leclercq has famously demonstrated, the devotion of existence to God in the monasteries coincides with an *amour des lettres*, or as the English translation puts it, a "love of learning."[25] But love, properly speaking, is not an affair of the mind alone; it involves the body, too, or better put, it involves the whole person. It is not enough to read the words of Scripture in the silence of one's heart and in the secret of one's cell. The words must be spoken aloud, together, and not only spoken, but sung, given a body of their own, a body of ordered beauty, involving the bodies of the monks in their proper dress, their proper posture and gestures, their proper place, in a space that is proper, itself beautifully ordered, in a time that is proper—the time of days and the time of the seasons. Culture is embodied religion; beauty is not accidental to religion but an inevitable expression thereof:[26] the divine cannot enter into the physical differentiation of matter in time and space without thereby revealing its meaning-conferring unity, which is to say, without causing that matter to radiate forth a beauty that transcends it.[27]

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24. In the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC, the exhibit that was contributed by the Vatican stands out from the other exhibits for a variety of reasons, one of which is that it features an artistic depiction of the figures of pagan mythology thought to have invented letters, and thus language generally, rather than focusing simply on the Bible itself. We ought to recognize not only that we have to learn to read properly *simpliciter* in order to read Scripture properly but also, reciprocally, that learning to read Scripture properly enables us to read better more generally. For an incomparably profound reflection on the nature of writing and reading in light of Scripture, see Ferdinand Ulrich, *Gabe und Vergebung* (Freiburg i. Br.: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 2005), 3–160, 791–93.

25. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

26. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Beauty and Revelation," *Philosophy Today* 3, no. 4 (1959): 231–42; *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 17–127; D.C. Schindler, "The Loss of Beauty and the De-naturing of Faith," in *The Beauty of God's House: A* Festschrift *for Stratford Caldecott*, ed. Francesca Murphy (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 36–62.

27. There are few people who have recognized the connection between the divine and beauty more profoundly than Hegel, though of course he cannot but finally undermine this connection given his fundamental presuppositions. See his introductory lectures on the various dimensions of absolute spirit collected in *On Art, Religion, and Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). On

That radiation of beauty exceeds the borders of the monastery chapel. Benedict recalls both parts of the Benedictine motto: *ora et labora*. "In the Greek world," he says, "manual labor was considered something for slaves. Only the wise man, the one who is truly free, devotes himself to the things of the spirit; he views manual labor as somehow beneath him, and leaves it to people who are not suited to this higher existence in the world of the spirit."[28] What distinguishes the Christians from the Greeks on this score, Benedict explains, is that the Christian God is a Creator, and indeed the Creator of all things, even the material world, from nothing, *ex nihilo*. He did not simply impose form on a pregiven and so equally divine matter, which would exist, so to speak, at a distance from him; nor does he confine himself, so to speak, to a contemplation of himself in some sense apart from the material world—*noēsis noēseōs*.[29] Instead, God acts in such a way as to give rise to a physical reality that is genuinely other than himself. For Benedict, this opens up a way to interpret the productive activity of human work: it is not due to a fall from the otherwise exclusively spiritual activity of contemplation; rather, it is a distinctive, and indeed privileged, participation, however distant, in the particularly divine act of creation.[30] Though Benedict does not mention it in this particular context in his address, we could point here again specifically to the Incarnation: Jesus was a carpenter for many years before he took on his public mission. The Church has always recognized the importance of the so-called "hidden life" of Christ for a proper interpretation of the meaning of the Incarnation. Just as Jesus as the Word sanctifies by analogy all human words, so too by his work he sanctifies in principle this otherwise apparently wholly pragmatic activity: "For by His incarnation the son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice, and

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the importance of art for absolute spirit, see William Desmond, *Art and the Absolute* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

28. Benedict XVI, "Origins of Western Theology," 304.

29. "Self-thinking thought" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.7).

30. John Paul II refers in a special way to the distinctive work of artists on this score. See his *Letter to Artists* (1999), 1.

loved with a human heart";[31] "we hold that through labor offered to God man is associated with the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, Who conferred an eminent dignity on labor when at Nazareth He worked with His own hands."[32]

One of the implications of this connection with Christ is that work needs to be interpreted most fundamentally not simply as a pragmatic activity but rather as a *cultural* activity, and this means, in light of our foregoing reflections, that it has a meaning, which we can call properly symbolic, beyond its mere economic or even functional significance. While work does indeed satisfy material needs, men's material needs are always at the same time religious needs, as we have seen. The beautiful form that belongs intrinsically to the singing of the word in liturgical prayer must also find analogous expression in the nature and organization of human work. Indeed, what we are saying about work ought to be recognized in an even more robust way in the symbolic form and interweaving of the natural and supernatural significance of sacramental marriage, though Benedict does not of course address this dimension in this address on monasticism.[33] When we include both marriage and work in the consideration of Christian culture, it brings to light the genuinely material and embodied dimension of this essential part of human existence, which might otherwise not be evident in liturgical songs of praise alone. Interpreted thus, not only the form of marriage and the home in which it unfolds, not only the physical activity of work, but all the products of that activity—which is to say absolutely everything from top to bottom that comprises what Hannah Arendt calls the "built world" of human social existence[34]—become a participation in the culture that is a *quaerere Deum*, a search for and celebration of God.

The infusion of all human activity and artifacts with theological significance is not an introduction from the outside

31. *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

32. Ibid., 67.

33. The significance of marriage on this score was, of course, a central theme in the pontificate of John Paul II. See, above all, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2006).

34. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (1958; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), passim, but esp. 136–38.

of a religious meaning into an otherwise "secular" activity. Instead, as we saw above and as Dawson constantly insisted, all human activities, to the extent that they are genuinely cultural, are already religious. The reason this is important is that it brings to light the fact that the Christian transformation of work and its products into an expression of the love of God is not the intrusion of a foreign element into a natural reality; instead, it is very much a transformation: it affirms the religious form already present and elevates it by revealing it as always having been destined for inclusion in the eschatological body of Christ, a body with cosmic dimensions. This elevation is at the same time a deepening, as we will explain in a moment. The point here is to see that this movement of beautiful form not only in the Church but beyond the explicit limits of the visible Church and into the material structures of the world unto the very soil is an expression of the logic of Christian faith. It is, as the Council Fathers said in *Ad gentes*, the logic of "the economy of the Incarnation," the implication of God's entry into the flesh.[35]

Modern theology has coined the term "inculturation" to capture something of this logic. As we see, for example, in the work of John Paul II, the word is used to express the way Christianity relates to cultures outside of the Church, a relation that arises from her essentially missionary character. This relation is typically described as a sort of reciprocal exchange: the "values" of the Gospel are transmitted to these cultures in such a way that the cultures receive those values and embody them, so to speak, in a unique form, which corresponds in some sense to what is native to them. The faith is not imposed on but rather "taken *into*," these cultures: *in*culturation. When the Church engages with new cultures that have not yet heard the Gospel, she does not simply displace them but instead affirms the good elements that already exist, renewing them and at the same time transforming them.

It is of course true that if "inculturation" is a new word, it indicates a reality as old as Christianity itself. But our reflections thus far suggest a few qualifications of the usual interpretation of the word. First of all, the deepest, and so governing, meaning of inculturation is not "intercultural dialogue" but the reality of the Incarnation itself, the inner telos in God's will to become

35. *Ad gentes*, 22.

incarnate, to take on flesh, to enter into a concrete, and thus simultaneously particular and universal, form in history; in other words, inculturation ought to be understood as having a vertical (theological and metaphysical) meaning that is more basic than its horizontal (sociological) meaning. "Inculturation" is in this respect another word for "Incarnation." Second, if we acknowledge this and at the same time recognize that culture is not a set of "outward trappings" but in fact "embodied religion," we see that the encounter between the Gospel and non-Christian peoples is not an encounter between disembodied faith and secular culture but an encounter between, on the one hand, a distinctively embodied Christian faith, the body of which arises from within the faith rather than being a kind of accidental overlay, and, on the other hand, cultures that are themselves in some sense embodied religions. This does not mean that a "dialogue" between the Church and non-Christian cultures is not possible; it only means that what occurs in this dialogue is not just the potentially new cultural expression of faith, but at the same time a new manifestation of the reality of culture already given. The Christian faith transforms the culture that receives it. In other words, inculturation must take a form that is analogous to Benedict's description of the monasteries: the preservation of the given classical culture, which slowly over centuries became the generation of a new, distinctively Christian culture. In this respect, the life of the monasteries is a paradigm of inculturation. Because faith has always already been embodied in culture, which itself is always already the reality of religious belief, it is misleading to speak of inculturation as a project, something that needs to be brought about, or more generally of "faith and culture" as if they were two separate things. Instead, they are as deeply one as the soul and body, and just as I can say not only that I *have* a body, but that I *am* my body, so too can we say that the Christian faith *is* the culture that grows within it.

III. CHRISTIANITY BRINGS THE *HUMANUM* TO PERFECTION

So far we have seen that culture is, as it were, naturally religious in the sense that it comprises human activity that opens up into a theological dimension. As Dawson puts it, "Culture is

a deliberate effort to bring human life into relation with divine reality and into subordination to divine power."[36] It is thus this *quaerere Deum* that gives cultures a unity, a meaningful order that is reflected in the practical forms that dignify individual acts, making them humanly *interesting* and indeed *beautiful*. Understood as culture, human life is not just an assemblage of discrete, disjointed little tasks but an enactment, in episodes, of a fundamental meaning, because culture is a natural movement of ascent. We have also seen that, while all religion seeks embodiment, as Christopher Dawson so regularly insisted, which means that all religion is spontaneously cultural, Christianity is unique in that, in this case, such embodiment is not an accidental form, however inevitable, but a reality that lies at the very heart of the content of the faith, the absolute center of Christian doctrine: the one *in* whom we believe, God himself, has become embodied. In other words, the cultural realization of Christianity is not simply a necessary implication of the fact that matter-bound human beings live out the worship of an otherwise otherworldly entity, but it is a deed of God himself. If in culture the earth ascends to heaven, in Christianity God has descended into the earth; he has entered culture. Culture in general is embodied memory, but, for the most part, the meaning—the particular religion or even ideology—in question is one that resists embodiment and trivializes matter; it will nevertheless be embodied, since that is an inevitable part of human nature, but its embodiment will thus introduce a kind of contradiction into the core of human existence. In Christianity, by contrast, the meaning that is embodied is a divine confirmation, however surprising, of embodiment. Our final step in this brief reflection is to make an initial case for why the intersection of heaven and earth in Christianity represents a uniquely fitting realization of the meaning of culture. A rigorous proof of Christianity's perfection of culture is out of the question, perhaps *simpliciter*, but in any event within the confines of the present context. Nevertheless, there are several suggestive points along these lines that have begun to come to light in this discussion, which we indicate in conclusion.

First of all, we noted Dawson's observation that in the ancient world there was no social activity that was not religious,

36. Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 44.

nor any religious activity that was not socially useful. What is interesting about this remark in the present context is that it expresses a twofold unity, two irreducibly different aspects—the religious and the social—of a single reality, namely culture. This twofold unity bears a striking resemblance to the Incarnation, which presents a profound and inseparable unity between two natures—the divine and the human—within a single person. The mystery articulated in this doctrine quite evidently deepens the complex unity of culture. One of the essential currents of the development of Christology has been a growing awareness and appreciation of not only the integrity of the human nature but its positive flourishing in relation to the divine: from the first insistence at Chalcedon on the nonreductive unity (ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαιρέτως, ἀχωρίστως; i.e., *inconfuse*, *immutabiliter*, *indivise*, *inseperabiliter*), to the "duotheletism" defended by Maximus the Confessor, to the christocentric humanism of *Gaudium et spes* ("By the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, Jesus Christ fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear").[37] With respect to culture, we might say that the Christian principle not only safeguards the unity of the religious and social while affirming their distinctness but in fact introduces a transformation of both dimensions, and indeed of the unity itself. Seen from a Christian perspective, the religious and the social dimensions of culture do not simply *happen* to coincide but are *essentially bound* to each other, even while the bond between them liberates each, so to speak, in its distinctness. Thus, it is no longer enough to speak simply of social "utility"; we ought instead to understand cultural activity as a distinct celebration of the intrinsic goodness of things, their essential beauty and truth.[38] Culture not only relates man to God but also relates nature to man, in such a way as to show forth, through this elevation, the deepest meaning of what is natural.[39] The world was

37. *Gaudium et spes*, 22. Aaron Riches, "Christology and Anti-Humanism," *Modern Theology* 29, no. 3 (July 2013): 311–37.

38. Josef Pieper has shown the rootedness of leisure and culture in the intrinsic goodness of things. See his *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*.

39. This is the ultimate meaning of the "dominion" given to man in Genesis, though this meaning is not opposed to the "use" man is meant to make of nature.

meant to be taken up in *this unique way*, given this particular form, and thus the beauty of the form discloses the truth of this stone, this shape, this fruit, this color, this fiber, this movement, this sound.[40] It is not just that the glory of nature, and the added glory of the human transformation of that nature, is "compatible" with the religious significance that such things "also" have. It is that God's self-revelation in Christ is itself a revelation of the glory of nature and of culture; God not only *posits* the intrinsic goodness of things as Creator, but he takes on that goodness through his Incarnation. Indeed, in the Incarnation he *receives* the goodness of things from his mother and from Joseph and thus receives them precisely as transformed through human culture. God's creative *yes* to the existence of things, which Pieper describes as the absolute paradigm of love,[41] his affirmation of their intrinsic goodness, truth, and beauty, which is the root of all culture, is not just a declaration but a very real deed: the Word made flesh.

But this properly ontological affirmation of the intrinsic goodness of nature does not absorb God into the natural world, as it has threatened to do in the unity of the religious and social in pre-Christian and non-Christian cultures. In such cultures, we face the alternatives of a monolithic way of life imposing itself on others, or a "synchretistic" blending of cultures, which amounts to a blending of religions, and indeed a blending of gods. The freedom of creation in Christianity, by contrast, coincides with the freedom of God; or, to put the point more directly, the very integrity of the natural world, which is deepened and not supplanted by the intrinsic goodness of human culture, is a revelation of God's radical transcendence, his being Creator *ex nihilo*. The paradox is that the very principle that establishes the goodness of a particular culture, the absoluteness it enjoys by virtue of its divine sanction, opens that culture up beyond itself, both in relation to God and in relation to nature, and thus relativizes it to what exceeds it, as it were. God's affirmation simultaneously

40. Here we might refer to Heidegger's profound reflection on the relation between "earth" and "world" in "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: HarperPerennial, 2008), 143–212. Nevertheless, we would propose viewing the relationship in terms of (Christian, incarnate) love rather than, as Heidegger does, in terms of (Heracleitean) *polemos*.

41. Josef Pieper, *Faith–Hope–Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 163–72.

reveals the limits of its particularity and celebrates those limits as a positive good.

This paradox leads to the second point. We spoke at the outset about the complex relationship between universality and particularity in culture. One might say that every culture strives to connect these two dimensions in a nonreductive way, or indeed that in a certain sense culture simply is nothing but a lived effort to unify the universal and the particular. If "high culture" distinguishes individuals by opening them up, beyond the bourgeois ethos, to a properly noble interest in what concerns man as such, "folk culture" gathers the whole of a people together in a manner that sets them apart from other cultures. In this context, too, we see a surprising fulfillment in Christianity. Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, has been called the "concrete universal."[42] Precisely as a Jew, living in the time of the Roman Empire, and coming from an insignificant little village, Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. The Christian understanding is that the universal and the particular are not opposed to each other in a dialectical fashion, wherein an emphasis on one side would imply a reduction of the other, even if one goes on to insist on the reciprocal dependence of these two aspects. Instead, there is a genuinely paradoxical unity between them in their apparent opposition.[43] The best way to open up to the universal is in and through the concrete particular; an affirmation of the universal does not merely relativize the particular as a kind of restriction, which may be unavoidable but is best set aside as far as possible, but coincides with a deepened attachment to the particular. The culture that the privileged individual may have been able to acquire through education, from this perspective, is not a treasure that he hoards over against the many, but instead it is a source of meaning for us all. And the distinctiveness of particular

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42. By Hegel, somewhat notoriously, but also by Balthasar: *A Theology of History* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 10–21; *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2: *Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 220–29.

43. For a wide and suggestive meditation on the various meanings of universality, and its relation to the particular, in philosophy and other areas of existence, see William Desmond, *The Intimate Universal: The Hidden Porosity Among Religion, Art, Philosophy, and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

cultures does not in principle imply any hostility toward others: one most profoundly opens up to people of other cultures, not in the way of liberal toleration, which in fact and in spite of its self-understanding implies a contempt for all culture—the universal in this case requires the elimination of the particular and so the trivializing of all culture[44]—but through love, which is always both particular and universal, self-related in being other-related. Because I love my culture, I can affirm you in a manner that essentially includes your love for your culture, and the very love of my culture, insofar as it is Christian, deepens my affirmation of yours. The only alternative to a liberal notion of universality is a culture formed in a religion with a universal scope, and the only universal religion that essentially affirms the embodied particularity of culture is the incarnate faith in the Incarnate God.

Finally, along these lines, which open to a global view, it is illuminating to consider that the particular culture within which and out of which the distinctive culture of Christianity emerged was in fact an extraordinary—let us say, providential—configuration of cultures, each of which makes a distinct contribution to the unity of the universal and the particular, the high and the low, the religious and the social/natural that is Christian culture. It is generally said that Christian culture grew out of a classical inheritance, which is described as "Greco-Roman" and typically conceived as a kind of store of great books, works of art, and institutions. While there is nothing wrong with this understanding in principle, our foregoing reflections prompt us to view the matter more expansively and more concretely. Christianity is not only the inheritance of the tradition of the Greeks and the Romans but also the tradition of the Jews. As the legal historian Harold Berman put it,

> The West . . . is not Greece and Rome and Israel but the peoples of Western Europe *turning* to the Greek and Roman and Hebrew texts for inspiration, and *transforming* those texts in ways that would have astonished their authors. . . . Indeed, each of the ancient ingredients of Western

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44. That is, I can affirm you only by denying that your culture has any real significance, by judging that "cultural differences don't matter; they're only skin deep." See Scott H. Moore, "Hospitality as an Alternative to Tolerance," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 600–08.

> culture was transformed by being mixed with the others. The amazing thing is that such antagonistic elements could be brought together into a single worldview. The Hebrew culture would not tolerate Greek philosophy or Roman law; the Greek culture would not tolerate Roman law or Hebrew theology; the Roman culture would not tolerate Hebrew theology, and it resisted large parts of Greek philosophy. Yet the West in the late eleveneth and early twelfth centuries combined all three, and thereby transformed each one.[45]

Moreover, no less important in understanding the distinctive character of Christian culture is a recognition of the formational role the barbarian tribes played as Christianity penetrated into the lands of what became medieval Europe.[46] Thus, Christianity is not universal in an abstract sense; it is the transformative unity of all four of these dimensions, each of which presents a universal principle in a different way.

Let us explore this a bit further. The Greeks, the "mother" culture of the Western world, offer the universality of nature, which means in turn the universality of philosophy and science; the Romans offer the universality of law and institution, as well as the human enterprise of establishing peace among nations and educating in humanity; and the Jews offer the universality of the absoluteness of God, who created all things and whose particular covenant with Israel was established within the universal covenant with Adam, and again with Noah, with a view to the new covenant in Christ. These three constitute no doubt the essential form of Christian culture, but we have to see that this form is not an abstract idea; instead, it represents a shape given to the matter, so to speak, of concrete peoples, all of whose native forms, values, practices, and so forth enter in some distinctive way into the Christian form, giving it in every case a unique character from a particular place in time. Christian culture is thus, we might say, cruciform, that is, made up of the intersection of two relative oppositions: the Jews and the Greeks, on the one hand, and the Romans and the barbarians on the other.

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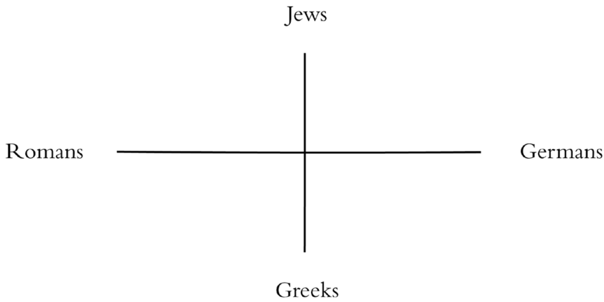
45. Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 3.

46. See Dawson's description in *The Crisis of Western Education*, 3–10.



It is the configuration of these sense-giving relations that allows us to see the Christian form as remaining ever open to new cultures, and at the same time it shows us why this openness is not abstract indeterminacy but is always a constant readiness to receive and transform, to fill with cultural substance, to irradiate with universal human meaning. Inside of this culture-forming energy, so to speak, every practice, every artifact, shines with a significance that both affirms and transcends its particularity, turning it into a gateway into the comprehensive world that *is* the Christian faith. Thus, Christianity is always ready to embrace the whole of humanity, in a liberating and not in a totalitarian way, and to bring the inner reality of human existence to perfection, a perfection that is distinctive and unique in every single case. This is why Christian culture represents the perfection of culture *simpliciter.*

To return to our opening comments, we ought now to recognize that to speak of "cultural Catholicism" or "cultural Christianity" is a redundancy, and it is altogether different from the phenomenon of a dead faith, which Aquinas describes as "formless" (*informis*).[47] Indeed, we can say that, to the extent that faith remains cultural and so retains at the very least an *outward* form, it is not quite dead; as Josef Pieper has suggested, the physically embodied realities of culture retain the meaning of the faith

47. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 4, pr. (hereafter cited as *ST*). Aquinas insists that living faith and dead faith are not separate things but essentially the same; they differ according to whether they are enlivened by charity. This means that a living faith is not something new but a renewal of what was already there in a "dead" way.

and offer the ever-present hope for its rekindling.[48] These real things can do so because culture *is* the faith *made visible*, and being visible is the heart of the faith in the God who made himself visible in Christ.[49] Culture, as we have seen, is in this case not merely an accidental by-product of an otherwise spiritual belief, but it represents something much more essential, more central to the faith in its innermost reality. In this regard, culture is a special treasure for Christians; we might say that culture belongs to Christians more essentially than to anyone else. Understood thus, culture is and has always been as much a task as it is an inheritance. This is especially true at a time in which we have radically surrendered a sense for culture, both an understanding of what it is and an appreciation, and indeed affection, for what it means. This loss of a sense of culture coincides, not incidentally, with a trivializing of the body (a trivializing that does not, *nota bene*, exclude an obsessive preoccupation with it!) and an eclipse of meaning. Given our forgetfulness of God, our loss of the religious dimension of existence, our loss of the basic meaning—the truth, beauty, and goodness—of which religion is the embodiment, it is no surprise that we generally disregard social form and fail to grasp, or even sense, the meaning communicated in color,[50] sound, rhythm, shape, form, and style, and that we tend to think of buildings, works of art and literature as museum pieces or discrete objects of historical study, if not mere relics of the past. In

48. Josef Pieper, "The Memory of the Body: The Historical-Concrete as a Living Reminder," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 405–419.

49. To be sure, faith is defined as a belief in things "unseen," but this does not imply a simple opposition between visibility and the faith in the sense that the more darkness there is, the more faith is possible. As Aquinas explains, the reason faith concerns what is not seen is that it requires a self-movement of the will, or, in other words, it requires freedom, which is what distinguishes the act of faith, for example, from the grasp of "self-evident" (i.e., *perfectly seen*) first principles, which cannot be understood without automatic assent. See *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 4.

50. For an account of the deep meaning of color, for example, as it was experienced in the Middle Ages, see Spike Bucklow, *The Alchemy of Paint: Art, Science, and the Secrets of the Middle Ages* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2009). See also his *Red: The Art and Science of a Color* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016). Although the point is especially clear in the matter of color, it would presumably be possible to undertake an analogous study of things like sound, smell, shape, and so forth.

this regard, we can say of culture what Balthasar has said of metaphysics and marriage: Christians are called to be the guardians of culture in our age. □

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