

INTRODUCTION: FAITH AND CULTURE



The Summer 2021 issue of *Communio* is centered on the theme of “Faith and Culture.” One commonplace perspective on this relationship holds that Christians, just like any sectarian or ethnic group, might have their own insular culture, but that this can only have tangential bearing on the larger culture in which they are embedded. Hence the faithful must decide whether and when to accommodate their way of life to the more encompassing culture at the risk dissipating this way of life, or else to hold fast to all that sets them apart and thus to accept irrelevance to the society of which they are members. In a variety of ways, the essays collected here seek to overcome this dilemma by acknowledging that Christianity, uniquely among all worldviews, matters for the whole of culture, and this precisely because it is through the Church alone that God addresses every need and perfects every good of human life, even down to its seemingly least significant expressions. As such, the faith offers great promise for an age of cultural decline, and it does so by calling the faithful always to live their confession with an integrity that of itself can rectify and transfigure the culture in which they dwell. According to *Gaudium et spes*, “The Gospel of Christ constantly renews the life and culture of fallen man. . . . By riches coming from above, it makes fruitful, as it were from within, the spiritual qualities and traditions of every people of every age” (59).

D.C. Schindler interprets faith and culture as intimately and inseparably related to one another in “Restoring Faith in

Culture.” While these two dimensions of human life are typically regarded as mutually exclusive, Schindler argues instead that the very nature of faith orders it to be incarnated in cultural forms and practices, and that it belongs to the very nature of culture to be shaped by, and in turn to shape its participants in, the fullest truth of reality, above all that of God. “Culture is embodied religion; beauty is not accidental to religion but an inevitable expression thereof: the divine cannot enter into the physical differentiation of matter . . . without causing that matter to radiate forth a beauty that transcends it.”

In “John Paul II’s Core Teaching on Culture (1979–1980),” **John P. Hittinger** presents Pope St. John Paul II’s fundamental view that culture is concerned foremost with developing in man a deeper sensitivity to all that makes him most human. “For a person, ‘being more’ means being in relationship with others; we do not seek to acquire or to assimilate but to encounter the other.” Materialist, consumerist, and technocratic ideologies undermine and curtail this education of man for a shared existence with other persons before God. In answer to such obstacles to fuller life, John Paul II argues that the human person must be seen not only as the agent but also as the end of culture.

Tracey Rowland follows Ratzinger in opposing a theological impulse to render the Christian faith fashionable for popular culture in “Joseph Ratzinger’s Trinitarian Theology of Culture.” For Ratzinger, Christianity can only be appealing to and efficacious for the world if its way of being flows out of the heart of its kerygma and its worship. “For a culture to be Christian its foundational *mythos* needs to be trinitarian and christocentric.” Only such a culture can order those who partake in it toward the sanctification and deification for which all most radically long.

In “The Priority of Peace and the Problem of Power,” **Andrew Willard Jones** proposes that liberalism’s understanding of political sovereignty has in fact collapsed, and that there is a present need to rediscover the meaning of power and the relation between the state and the community it serves. To do so, Jones turns to St. Thomas Aquinas and especially to the way in which Thomas presents a father’s relationship to his son as the paradigm of political power, where the father elevates the son to

participation in his own authority through presence to the son, thereby enabling the son to dwell at peace in the order of society and creation. “Rather than imagining law as leading to freedom, I would rather assert that living in the peace, in the law, is what it means to be free—to be at home in the world.”

Paul Tyson, in “What is Music? On the Form and Performance of Beauty,” develops a Platonic metaphysics of music that recognizes that the beautiful ordering of sound bears meaning to a mind. What this means, Tyson holds, is that music, though irreducible to concepts and language, has the capacity to impart in sensory form a wisdom about the highest things, and hence to orient its listener toward contemplation of divine beauty. “Music expresses the high yearnings and the embodied limits of humanly grasped significance, as mentally seen and as creatively re-sung by human art.” Technical analysis, neuroscientific explanation, and aesthetic appreciation of music, though not without importance, are not themselves sufficient for grasping this deepest way, the recollection of God, in which music serves the end of culture.

In “Is There a Christian Art? Soundings in Catholic Art Theory since the Schlegels,” **Aidan Nichols** comments on the question of whether Christianity offers a distinctive and recognizable modality of art. Nichols considers an array of influential art critics and philosophers of art, attending to a dominant view that Christian art can never be isolated from the pagan and secular works with which it is always entwined and hence is finally indistinguishable from any other art. On such a view, the most we can say is that “‘Christian art’ means ‘art practiced by Christians’ and/or ‘art applied to a Christian subject matter.’” Nichols, by contrast, suggests an opening toward an understanding of Christian art that is inwardly formed by faith and all the more universal for this.

In *Retrieving the Tradition*, we feature translations of three writings that meditate on different dimensions of our theme. First, **Josef Pieper** reflects on the meaning of the commemoration of persons and events in “Corporeal Memory: The Concrete Things of History as Living Reminders.” In keeping with the occasion of his address, the thousandth anniversary of Mainz Cathedral’s founding, Pieper dwells above all on the recollective character of a cathedral. He argues that such

a building's preservation of and connection to an earlier age accords with our essential character as embodied and our attendant need to receive ultimate reality through material signs. Moreover, he holds that a cathedral achieves such signification precisely by serving no purpose outside of the bodily deed of liturgical thanksgiving that it houses and embellishes. "There exists an existential richness that we can possess only as a gift, a richness that is naturally able to survive only in superabundance, only in the gratuitous transcendence of all pragmatic and economic concerns."

In his early essay "The Art of the Fugue: Paralipomena to a Performance," **Hans Urs von Balthasar** unfolds the theological significance of Bach's last (unfinished) masterwork. Bach's use of the fugue, where the piece possesses an intelligible integrity that transcends its composer, stands in stark contrast to the Romantic approach to art, where, Balthasar remarks, "the artist no longer desired renown for his work but rather wanted that prize for himself." He concludes that, in relation to musical forms that preceded and succeeded it, the Baroque fugue most perfectly reflects the ordered freedom and free order that characterizes the Church's common life in union with God.

"It is clear that the mere demand for culture, or the planning of new programs, or the mere discussion of the problem as we find in the press, which cannot do more, is in no way sufficient." In his homily "On the Cultural Mission of the Church," Balthasar attends to the Church's unique power to fructify culture in an age that is inhibited from composing and receiving great expressions of beauty. The primary ground of this power is, according to Balthasar, the Church's work of communicating the Incarnate Word through the liturgy, which in turn gives life to other cultural forms. Hence, her generative relation to culture is not distinguished first by her productivity, but instead by her silent and faithful receptivity to God. □

—The Editors