

# The mystery of Easter and the culture of death

Marc Ouellet

The proclamation of hope lies at the heart of the gospel of life.

"Death and life were locked together in a unique struggle. Life's Captain died; now he reigns, never more to die."<sup>1</sup>

As the third Christian millennium approaches, the Church is becoming increasingly immersed in an extraordinary fight for life. The publication of the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) represents an important stage in this battle for the affirmation of the value and inviolability of human life. It aims at countering a certain nihilism of values which threatens what we may call the spiritual ecology of mankind. John Paul II's solemn intervention assumes all the more significance from the fact that it continues and realizes the moral teaching reaffirmed by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, published in 1992 and 1993 respectively. One infers a long-term strategy to mobilize the conscience of believers and people of good will in the fight against the "culture of death" which has more and more established itself on a planetary scale.

Nevertheless, the message of *Evangelium Vitae* does not principally concern the denunciation of threats against life. It first and above all proclaims the good news of life in a way that makes explicit the theological foundations of human dignity: "The Gospel of life is not simply a reflection, however new

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<sup>1</sup>The Roman missal, Easter Sunday sequence.

and profound, on human life. Nor is it merely a commandment aimed at raising awareness and bringing about significant changes in society. Still less is it an illusory promise of a better future. The Gospel of life is something concrete and personal, for it consists in the proclamation of *the very person of Jesus*" (EV, n. 29).

This christological proposition is affirmed as the spearhead of the project of new evangelization promulgated by John Paul II. It is inscribed within a doctrinal development which integrates more profoundly fundamental morality and the precepts of natural law into a christological and trinitarian vision. The categorical moral imperative "You shall not kill," which inspires the Church toward a preference for life in the face of cultures of death, proceeds more clearly than ever from the paschal Christ, the victor over sin and death. It is important to emphasize this fact, which renews the magisterial approach to ethical problems. Indeed, it is true that the inviolable dignity of the human person rests upon the natural law issued by the Creator; but its ultimate foundation arises from God's engagement in history. The awareness of this engagement must more than ever nourish the Church's hope and the message of life she addresses to secularized cultures.

#### *The culture of death*

To those young people gathered from around the world in Denver in 1993, the pope from the East exclaimed: "Do not allow the makers of the culture of death to manipulate your consciences!" The "culture of death" is a paradoxical expression with a more profound significance than simple rhetoric, since it is taken up systematically in *Evangelium Vitae* to stigmatize the massive attacks upon life. This paradoxical expression provides a dramatic complement to the rather optimistic developments of *Gaudium et Spes* on the blossoming of culture (nn. 53-62). Confronted with the changes characteristic of the modern world (industrialization, urbanization, means of communication) which have generated new forms of culture (mass culture), the Council reconsidered the Church's mission with respect to cultures in the most positive way possible. However, with the passing of time and the evolution of societies, a certain number of critical questions raised at the Council have today acquired a more dramatic relevance. For example: "how can we recognize as legitimate the autonomy a culture claims for itself, without thereby

reverting to a humanism which is purely worldly and even hostile to religion?"<sup>2</sup>

John Paul II returned to the discourse on the dignity of the human person in the light of the cultural developments concerning the respect for life in the last thirty years. His intervention assumes the form of a warning cry, because he witnesses a veritable "conspiracy against life" at work on every level (EV, n. 17). Beyond territorial armed conflicts and civil wars occasionally bordering on genocide, he sees with a great unease that the threats against life have broadened and multiplied as far as the eye can see. Particular interest groups have joined forces with national and international institutions to spread contraception, sterilization, abortion, and even euthanasia as conquests of freedom. The phenomenon has grown to such magnitude that John Paul II does not hesitate to denounce it as "scientifically and systematically programmed threats" (EV, n. 17), the fruit of a secularist mentality become hostile to the significance of God in ethical debates.

The problem is articulated in terms of "culture" because it goes beyond the recognition of personal situations more or less in conflict with universally recognized values. We observe, rather, an upheaval of values on the social, cultural, and political level. The crimes against life thus come to be presented as "legitimate expressions of individual freedom, to be acknowledged and protected as actual rights" (EV, n. 18). What follows is an astonishing contradiction, which the pope unambiguously unmasks: "Precisely in an age when the inviolable rights of the person are solemnly proclaimed and the value of life is publicly affirmed, the very right to life is being denied or trampled upon, especially at the more significant moments of existence: the moment of birth and the moment of death" (EV, n. 18).

As the pope indicates, lying at the roots of this "culture of death," legitimized through legal dispositions and democratic practices, is the severing of the link between freedom and truth in the consciences of people today. Such was the object of a detailed analysis in *Veritatis Splendor*: "The saving power of truth is contested, and freedom alone, uprooted from any objectivity, is left to decide by itself what is good and what is

<sup>2</sup>Cf. GS, n. 56. See also the very critical passage denouncing the attacks upon life (GS, n. 27).

evil" (VS, n. 84). This culture of autonomous choice, liberated from God's commands, only accelerates "the fearful plunging of the human person into situations of gradual self-destruction" (EV, n. 84); it also destroys the basis that safeguards just relations among people. In effect, the absence of a sure moral reference based on truth opens the door to an exploitation of ideas and convictions for the sake of power. This applies not only to totalitarian ideologies which have systematically manipulated public opinion, but also to pluralistic societies in which the "risk of an alliance between democracy and ethical relativism" threatens civil concord (VS, n. 101): "As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism."<sup>3</sup>

Thus, at the heart of the drama lived by modern man, there lies the "eclipse of the sense of God and of man" (EV, n. 21), which leads individual consciences toward a systematic violation of the moral law and a loss of the awareness of God's vivifying and saving presence. The consequences of this touch not only private relations among persons and the foundations of communal life, but they reach moral judgment and man's capacity to hear God's voice in his conscience. Bereft of its vital grounding in the Judeo-Christian tradition, "the moral conscience, both individual and social, is today subjected, also as a result of the penetrating influence of the media, to an *extremely serious and mortal danger*: that of *confusion between good and evil* precisely in relation to the fundamental right to life" (EV, n. 24). Such is the warning that emerges from the pope's critique of the culture of death.

Alarmism? Intolerance? Pessimism? Does this critique of modern culture rely too much upon a vision tied to a passé Christianity, long since transformed? Does it not ignore the signs of noticeable progress, even at the moral level, in the awareness of human rights, democratic values, and the spirit of solidarity that characterizes the evolution of cultures? It is important to note that the brushstrokes John Paul II vigorously applies to this portrait also include positive signs inspiring hope. The growth and development of biomedical research, the rise of a sensitivity increasingly opposed to war as a means of conflict resolution, the continual broadening of public opinion's aver-

<sup>3</sup>John Paul II, encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (1 May 1991), n. 46; cited in VS, n. 101.

sion to the death penalty, pro-life movements which, without recourse to violence, give witness to society to the value of life, as well as countless voluntary commitments to the service of life figure among the positive signs that complete and nuance the dark painting of negative signs (EV, nn. 26-27).

It would not be inappropriate to remark in passing that the pope's diagnosis of the deplorable state of health of secularized societies echoes the warning cries coming from specialists in the human sciences: "An atmosphere of death and the idea of a universe deprived of perspective seem to characterize our times. Society inwardly unravels and implodes as political and moral causes prove, with the passing of time and the encounter with reality, to be illusions."<sup>4</sup> Attentive observers of the psychological evolution of individuals and societies marvel with increasing concern at the breakdown of personal communication, the emergence of increasing and uncontrollable violence, the spreading phenomenon of depression, and the rising suicide rate, especially among young people. This specialist of social psychology dares to confess that the legal practice of abortion and euthanasia releases an atmosphere of death into society: "The mother and the doctor—symbols of life—thus become a symbol of selection and negation of life. This deadly reversal serves only to express society's need for self-destruction: 'No future!'"<sup>5</sup>

According to the same author, we must search for the remedies for a "depressive society," which no longer offers any ideal to young people, in a clear affirmation of the relation to God and the moral values grounded in it: "We must admit it, the relationship to the transcendent makes possible a deepening of meaning in life, a development of interiority, and the humanization of individuals and societies."<sup>6</sup> The Church's message of life goes much further. It does not aim first at raising again the moral level of society. It proclaims the gospel of life in Jesus Christ, which transcends the horizon of earthly life in order to embrace that of eternal life. That which psychologists—those who do not accept secularist presuppositions—recognize as a need for structuring the psychological identity of individuals, the Church proposes as a grace and mission of salvation ac-

<sup>4</sup>T. Anatrella, *Non à la société dépressive* (Flammarion, 1993), 9.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 305.

complished in Jesus Christ. In short, the proclamation of hope lies at the heart of the gospel of life.

*The hope of the Church*

The reasons for living that so many young people so cruelly lack cannot be found outside of the truth affirmed by Vatican Council II and taken up as a refrain by John Paul II: "by his Incarnation, he, the son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man" (GS, n. 22). The Church's response to the challenges of secularized cultures is not limited to reaffirming the basic truths that any person of good will can understand. To be sure, the Church recalls the created character of human freedom and thus its dependence on the Creator and its need to obey the precepts of the natural law affecting the inviolable value of life. However, something more decisive wholly permeates the message about the value of life: a christological development which places the ethical discourse in a more concrete relation to the grace of Christ. In other words, the natural law discourse does not suffice on its own. It is integrated as an important element in a more comprehensive christological whole. In the style of *Gaudium et Spes*, the developments of each chapter are articulated around the paschal mystery of Christ who joins together the worldly responsibility for life and the participation in the eternal life of God.<sup>7</sup>

When the Church observes the ravages of the culture of death upon so many innocent victims, she lifts her eyes toward the crucified One whose passion and death assume all of the anxieties and tragedies that form the fabric of human history. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses this in a profound way: "All the troubles, for all time, of humanity enslaved by sin and death, all the petitions and intercessions of salvation history are summed up in the cry of the incarnate Word. Here the Father accepts them and, beyond all hope, answers them by raising his Son" (CCC, n. 2606). The Church's first attitude with respect to the culture of death consists in confessing the mystery of Easter, proclaiming the reversal of every tragedy and the granting of every prayer. "No one saw the hour of your victory.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, the Introduction, 1-2; chap. I, n. 25; the whole of chap. II, but most especially nn. 29-30, 50-51; chap. III, nn. 52, 76-77; chap. IV, nn. 78-81; and the Conclusion, nn. 101-5.

No one is witness to the birth of a world. No one knows how the night of that Saturday's hell was transformed into the light of the Easter dawn. Asleep it was that we were all carried on wings over the abyss, and asleep did we receive the grace of Easter. And no one knows how it happened to him. No one knows which hand it was that caressed his cheek so that suddenly the wan world beamed with a thousand colors, and he had to smile involuntarily over the miracle that was realized in him."<sup>8</sup>

The moment the Son of Man hands over his spirit to the Father in the extreme abandonment of death a stream of eternal life trickles from the pierced side, prefiguring the river of life of Easter and Pentecost. The Son's obedience vanquished every disobedience of all the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve and sealed the new covenant, the mutual and fruitful covenant, in his blood. From here comes the Church's imperative, her boldness in affirming the inviolable value of human life (EV, nn. 50-51): "The blood of Christ, while it reveals the grandeur of the Father's love, shows how precious man is to God's eyes and how priceless the value of his life" (EV, n. 25). Divine love paid the price of blood to win back human freedom gone astray. Who has sung this better than Péguy?

It was yours to reckon the eternal account  
How much those abandoned it cost me to save.  
Here's ink and here's table to figure it out  
At what rate I borrowed the blood that I gave.

It was yours to reckon, O tireless bursar,  
Space, site, and time, how much it cost.  
To what extent man drew from my purse  
The blood of a God, to ransom the lost.<sup>9</sup>

The blood of Christ gives a priceless value to all human life by virtue of the indestructible bond that links all men to the theanthropic obedience of the Son of God. This redemptive obedience brings the human being into the realm of the trinitarian exchanges. John Paul II's christological meditation thus opens into the trinitarian foundation of the supreme dignity of

<sup>8</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Heart of the World*, trans. Erasmo S. Leiva (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1979), 157.

<sup>9</sup>Charles Péguy, *Eve* (Paris: La Pléiade, 1975), 988, quatrain 426, and 989, quatrain 430.

human life. "To know God and his Son is to accept the mystery of the loving communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit into one's own life, which *even now* is open to eternal life because *it shares in the life of God*" (EV, n. 37). Already infinitely precious because he is loved for his own sake by an infinite God, the human person receives an unfathomable excess of dignity from the fact that he belongs henceforward to the sacred enclave in which the intratrinitarian love is expressed. He is infinitely precious not only in himself but also for God himself who has invested his Glory in this unique creature created in his image and likeness.

If each person is a gift from the Father, not only for his own sake but also for the Son—a gift received, enriched and returned to the Father in the Spirit—, then it becomes sacrilegious to violate the life that is called to express and serve the greater glory of God. "Father, I wish that, there where I am, those that you have given me be also with me, and that they fulfill the glory that you have given me for you have loved me before the foundation of the world" (Jn 17:24). Irenaeus's comment is appropriate in this context: "The Glory of God" is certainly "the living man" but "the life of man consists in the vision of God,"<sup>10</sup> that is, in communion with God, something already begun in this world. Here, the human person finds himself enriched by God himself—which is to say divinized—, becoming a participant in the trinitarian relations. The profound identity of each person is thus hidden in Christ, in the theanthropic Person of the incarnate Word, the *vinculum substantiale*, who joins mankind and the Trinity together in a nuptial and indissoluble fashion. Trinitarian life and human life are forever more inseparable. In the paschal Christ, their destinies are joined and wedded for a common fruitfulness that the Scriptures call Glory. As the sacrament of this covenantal mystery, we see that the Church is engaged in the first person in the mission of him who has come so that men may have life and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10).

That is why the sovereign ideal that the Church proposes to humanity is the total gift of self in the image and likeness of the Trinity. This total gift through love in the following of the crucified Christ designates the path of true freedom. "*The Crucified Christ reveals the authentic meaning of freedom, he lives it fully,*

<sup>10</sup>St. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus Haereses* IV, 20, 7 (SC 100/2: 648-49), cited in EV, n. 38.

*in the total gift of himself*, and he calls his disciples to share in his freedom" (VS, n. 85). Because his blood was spilled as a sign of love, he has changed the sign of death and definitive separation into a sign of communion and eternal life. "In this way Jesus proclaims that *life finds its center, its meaning and its fulfillment when it is given up*" (EV, n. 51). "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?" (1 Cor 15:54-55). The battle for freedom which stands at the heart of the Church's mission leads through the witness borne to the Truth who "sets free" for eternal life (Jn 8:32; Gal 5:1).

### *Engaged in God's battle*

The Holy Father's christological meditation marks all of the developments concerning the Church's mission in the service of life and the promotion of a "culture of life." Whether it be to bring to light the inviolable dignity of the person, the sacred character of his belonging to God in Christ, to confirm the natural law of the fifth commandment, or to awaken the conscience of believers and galvanize their energies toward the battle for the respect for life, we find ourselves in the presence of a divine drama, to use Balthasar's term, which includes mankind in Christ's Easter. In this respect, the encyclical's conclusion adds a Marian dimension which far surpasses the framework of a pious and exemplary reference. This reference to the Mother of sorrows clearly illustrates the prophetic character of the Polish pope, mindful of illuminating people's consciences from the standpoint of the Marian message of the Apocalypse. Under the "great portent" of the "Woman" chased by "an enormous red fire Dragon" who wants to "devour the newly born Infant" (Rev 12:1-4), he sees the hostility of the forces of evil at work in history which strike the Mother before striking the children. "Mary thus helps the Church to *realize that life is always at the center of a great struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness*" (EV, n. 104; emphasis added).

Mary teaches the Church to give birth, amidst great pains, to the Savior throughout the centuries by standing with her at the foot of the cross (Jn 19:25). Her spiritual maternity "fully ripened on the day of the cross, when the time came for Mary to welcome as a son every person who had become a disciple, bearing them the Son's redemptive love" (Jn 19:26). It is thus that Mary, the sorrowful yet victorious Mother, is the living word of

consolation and strength for the Church in her battle against death and the culture of death.

The figure of Mary, set in relief in such an expressive manner, remains emblematic. She leads the Church into God's battle, which the book of the seven seals describes in apocalyptic images. The victory of the Lamb over the forces of darkness that wash human history in blood is not a pious consolation of the "happy-ending" sort. It is an exhortation to battle and to faithfulness to the end, in the midst of adversity and persecution. John Paul II assumes this apocalyptic vein in a more forceful and incisive way here than in any other document of his pontificate. We sense in this encyclical a passion that echoes that of a Charles Péguy, who praises the mystery of the charity of Joan of Arc: "A soul, a single soul, bears an infinite worth. What, then, would be the worth of an infinity of souls?"<sup>11</sup> At the spectacle of impiety that unfolds over the kingdom of France, the Orléans maiden is moved with compassion, as well as with impatience and bravery, for God's battle in his saints: "Jeanette: Saint Geneviève, Saint Aignan, Saint Loup were not afraid to go before the pagan armies. . . . In the folds of their coats they carried the glory of God and the body of Jesus. . . . Never would they have abandoned it. . . ." <sup>12</sup> "Christianity must go on"—a phrase tirelessly repeated by the poet theologian, the peasant soldier Péguy, whose passion for justice was equalled only by the breadth of his hope. Christian culture must go on. . . .

By taking up an account of the familiar commandment "You shall not kill" in the light of Easter, John Paul II sides with the poorest, the most innocent and the defenseless, following the Master's example. Now more than ever, the disillusioned world awaits a similar witness from Christian men and women. Something of the infinite worth of a human life shines through a doctor's refusal to perform an abortion; through a nurse's dedication in comforting the suffering of one dying, without shortening his days; through the charity of a social worker who directs a helpless young pregnant woman to a clinic of life and not death; through the courage of a delegate who opposes a majority wishing to legalize the attacks on human life. With an admiration mixed with respect and astonishment, the whole world

<sup>11</sup>Charles Péguy, *Le mystère de la charité de Jeanne d'Arc* (Paris: La Pléiade, 1957), 522.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 500-501.

saluted King Baudouin, who stepped down from the throne rather than countersign his country's parliamentary law legalizing abortion. Christianity must assert itself as a "culture of life" in the service of a world disoriented by the "culture of death."

In the encounter with the nihilist drift leading democracies to level sacred values, the Church, the expert in humanity and the servant-spouse of the Lamb, recalls the truths and the values that form the basis of a civilization of love: obedience to the Creator and his law inscribed in the moral conscience of mankind; respect for life from the moment of conception to the moment of death; the priority of the family in social politics; union with Jesus in the "call for a 'sincere gift of self' as the fullest way to realize our personal freedom" (*EV*, n. 81). As a compassionate mother, the Church patiently accompanies the meandering steps of her children, and she casts a hopeful look at the human tragedies arising from sin. She thus points to the crucified and risen One who unveils the ultimate truth: the unfathomable freedom of trinitarian love, able to change darkness into light so that his Glory will shine in man.

By way of conclusion, we once again leave the word to the poet of hope, blessed for having died in battle in the sight of God:

Now every man has the right to bury his own son.  
Every man on earth, if the great misfortune befalls him  
Not to have died before his son. And I alone, God,  
My hands tied by this adventure,  
I alone, father at that moment like so many fathers,  
I alone was unable to bury my son.  
It was then, O night, that you arrived.  
O my daughter, my most precious among them all, and it is still before  
my eyes and it will remain before my eyes for all eternity.  
It was then, O Night, that you came and, in a great shroud, you buried  
The Centurion and his Romans,  
The Virgin and the holy women,  
And that mountain, and that valley, upon which the evening was  
descending,  
And my people of Israel and sinners and, with them, he who was dying,  
he who had died for them  
And the men sent by Joseph of Arimathea who were already approaching  
Bearing the white shroud.<sup>13</sup>—Translated by David Louis Schindler, Jr. □

<sup>13</sup>Charles Péguy, *Le porche de la Deuxième Vertu* (Paris: La Pléiade, 1986), 669-70 [Eng. trans., *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996)].