

TOWARD A CULTURE OF LIFE:
THE EUCHARIST, THE
“RESTORATION” OF CREATION,
AND THE “WORLDLY” TASK OF
THE LAITY IN LIBERAL
SOCIETIES

• David L. Schindler •

“Community is not first an *object* of choice but a *gift*
always already given and calling forth gratitude
and further giving.”

1. *Communion ecclesiology and a “new” sense of the world and of the
identity/mission of the lay faithful.*

The Second Vatican Council’s *communio* ecclesiology indicates a “new” (renewed) understanding, not only of the Church, but of the world itself. In light of the great text *Gaudium et Spes*, 22, we can say that this ecclesiology recuperates in an organic way the trinitarian-eucharistic destiny of creation in Jesus Christ, and thereby deepens and transforms what is meant by creation in its original-natural integrity as such.¹

¹Pope John Paul II, citing *Gaudium et Spes* [=GS], 22, states that perhaps the most important teaching of the Council lies in the Church’s call, following Christ, to link theocentrism and anthropocentrism “in a deep and organic way” [“Ecclesia tamen Christum secuta conatur eos (i.e., theocentrism and anthropocentrism) hominum in historia coniungere intimo concordique nexu.”] (*Dives in Misericordia*

Christifideles Laici [=CL] defines the lay faithful both in terms of the “newness of Christian life” received at Baptism and in terms of their “secular character” (CL, 16). “The ‘world’ [is] the place and the means for [the lay faithful] to fulfill their Christian vocation, because the world itself is destined to glorify God the Father in Christ” (CL, 16). The laity’s presence in the world, in short, is a properly theological and not merely sociological or indeed (social-) ethical presence (cf. CL, 15).

The sense of the “secular” and of “worldly” presence implied in a *communio* ecclesiology thus indicates a dual unity of purpose for the laity: namely, by virtue of the new life in Christ given at Baptism, (a) to “restore to creation all its original value,” (b) by drawing all things, in and through Christ and his Eucharist, to the Father, “so that God might be all in all [*τά πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν*; *omnia in omnibus*] (cf. I Cor 15: 28; Jn 12: 32)” (CL, 15).

The proper identity—and mission—of the lay faithful, in a word, consists in *being* a eucharistic presence at the heart of the “secular,” a presence which, precisely in its *supernatural* character, restores to creation its rightful *secular* meaning—its *natural* integrity, or “*iusta autonomia*” (GS, 36), as created.

2. *The struggle between a “culture of death” and a “culture of life”*

These principles exhibit their concrete significance in relation to the “signs of the times,” which the Holy Father reads in terms of a profound struggle between a “culture of death” and a “culture of life” (see especially *Evangelium Vitae* [=EV], e.g., 28).

a. *The “culture of death.”* Recognizing many positive developments in contemporary society, John Paul II nonetheless characterizes our situation as one involving a “dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the ‘culture of death’ and the ‘culture of life’” (EV, 28). Identifying the “culture of death” as a “structure of sin” (EV, 12), the pope describes the main features of this culture. “The criterion of personal dignity—which demands respect,

[=DM], 1), that is, against the tendency of “various currents of human thought both in the past and at the present time . . . to separate [these]” or even to oppose them (DM, 1).

generosity and service—is replaced by the criterion of efficiency, functionality and usefulness: Others are considered not for what they ‘are,’ but for what they ‘have, do and produce.’ This is the supremacy of the strong over the weak” (EV, 23).

The pope speaks of “a certain Promethean attitude” in the culture that “leads people to think that they can control life and death” (15); of an attitude that views suffering as “the epitome of evil, to be eliminated at all costs” (15). He speaks of “a self-centered concept of freedom” (13), and again of a false autonomy that fails to see that freedom “possesses an inherently relational dimension” and is essentially linked with truth (19). Corresponding to this view is a mentality that “recognizes as a subject of rights only the person who enjoys full or at least incipient autonomy and who emerges from a state of total dependence on others” (19). Man becomes “concerned only with ‘doing,’ and using all kinds of technology,” busying “himself with programming, controlling and dominating birth and death” (22). “Nature itself, from being *mater* (mother), is now reduced to being ‘matter,’ and is subjected to every kind of manipulation” (22). A “practical materialism” reigns “which breeds individualism, utilitarianism and hedonism” (23). “The so-called ‘quality of life’ is interpreted primarily or exclusively as economic efficiency, inordinate consumerism, physical beauty and pleasure, to the neglect of the more profound dimensions—inter-personal, spiritual and religious—of existence” (23). The “supremacy of the strong over the weak” (23), however paradoxically, given the intention of democracy, “effectively moves toward a form of totalitarianism” (20): totalitarianism in the sense that the “state arrogates to itself the right to dispose of the life of the weakest and most defenseless members, from the unborn to the elderly, in the name of a public interest which is really nothing but the interest of a certain group” (20).

John Paul II locates the source of the primacy accorded the criteria of efficiency, functionality, and usefulness ultimately in the culture’s loss of the sense of God. “By living ‘as if God did not exist,’ man not only loses sight of the mystery of God, but also of the mystery of the world and the mystery of his own being” (22).² He

² “[W]hen the sense of God is lost, the sense of man is also threatened and poisoned, as the Second Vatican Council concisely states: ‘Without the Creator, the creature would disappear But when God is forgotten, the creature itself

no longer considers life as a splendid gift of God, something ‘sacred’ entrusted to his responsibility and thus also to his loving care and ‘veneration.’ Life itself becomes a mere ‘thing,’ which man claims as his exclusive property, completely subject to his control and manipulation” (22). In the end it is “the blood of Christ [that reveals] the grandeur of the Father’s love, [and in so doing shows] how precious man is to God’s eyes and how priceless the value of his life” (25).

b. *The “culture of death” as a “structure of sin.”* The pope’s description and criticism of the “culture of death” do not imply a denial that persons in such a culture often seek to “program . . . and control birth and death” out of motives of compassion (cf. embryonic stem cell research, *in vitro* fertilization, and so on), motives that are indeed often supported by sincerely held religious beliefs. (In the United States, for example, polls indicate that more than 90 percent of the people believe in God.) The pope’s description and criticism bear rather on the *order* (“onto-logic”) carried often unconsciously in a person’s way of life, action, and thought, *despite and within* what may otherwise be the compassionate, religious intentions motivating this way of life. That is why the Holy Father refers to the “culture of death” as a “*structure of sin*” (emphasis added) (EV, 12: *peccati institutum*; EV, 24: *structuras peccati*).³

c. *The “culture of life.”* The nature of the “culture of life” that the pope calls for in response to the “culture of death” is implicit in the foregoing description: a culture rooted in a sense of community and relationship centered ultimately in the eucharistic love of Jesus Christ and inclusive of all of life and of the body itself:

grows unintelligible’ [GS, 36]” (EV, 22).

³What the pope understands as structural sin is of course always rooted in personal sin. This personal sin nevertheless has a social and indeed objective-intellectual dimension that reaches beyond individual persons and into the structures of society. As John Paul puts it in *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 56, sin as a “subjective” rebellion against God can take the (“external”) form of a philosophy or ideology shaping a program or indeed the institutions of civilization, giving those institutions their original shape and meaning, precisely *as* institutions. Such a philosophy or world view of course need not be explicitly thought out or thematized as such. On the contrary, it can and often is left implicit and thus operates more or less unconsciously and invisibly in the original order and consequent functioning of institutions (this is the case especially in liberal societies).

On the secularistic logic of religion in America, see the “classic” statement of Will Herberg, *Protestant Catholic Jew* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983 [1955]).

It is the proclamation of a living God who is close to us, who calls us to profound communion with himself and awakens in us the certain hope of eternal life. It is the affirmation of the inseparable connection between the person, his life and his bodiliness. It is the presentation of human life as a life of relationship, a gift of God, the fruit and sign of his love. It is the proclamation that Jesus has a unique relationship with every person, which enables us to see in every human face the face of Christ. It is the call for a 'sincere gift of self' as the fullest way to realize our personal freedom. (EV, 81)

The comprehensive sense of community and relationship indicated here, again, has its roots in the Church understood as "communion," and this is basic for the vocation of the laity:

Precisely because it derives from Church *communion*, the sharing of the lay faithful in the threefold mission of Christ requires that it be lived and realized *in communion* and *for the increase of communion itself*. (CL, 14; see ch. 2, nos. 18-31)

Communion, in other words, is itself already the mission of the laity (CL, 32).

3. Senses of creaturely community implied by communion ecclesiology

The notion of the Church as *communion* entails at least five senses of community or relation as constitutive of the world of creation.

(i) *Christifideles Laici* emphasizes that "relation to God is a constitutive element of [one's] very 'nature' and 'existence':⁴ it is in God that we 'live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28)" (CL, 39).

(ii) The "human person has an inherently social dimension which calls a person from the innermost depths of self to *communion* with others and to the *giving* of self to others.⁵ . . . Thus society as a

⁴"Relatio enim qua homo cum Deo devincitur, elementum constitutivum est ipsius 'naturae' et 'existentiae' hominis." (The official English translation renders "naturae" as "being.")

⁵"Persona humana nativam atque propriam dimensionem sociale sortitur prout ex intimo animo ad *communionem* cum aliis et ad *donationem* ad alios vocatur."

fruit and sign of the social nature of man reveals its whole truth in being a communion of persons” (CL, 40).

(iii) *Christifideles Laici* points out that “the first and basic expression of the social dimension of the person . . . is the married couple and the family. . . . [The] partnership [*consociatio*] of man and woman constitutes the first form of the communion of persons” (CL, 40). “The family is the basic cell of society” (CL, 40). Elsewhere the Holy Father states that “the sexual difference constitutes the very identity of the person.”⁶ These assertions imply that nuptial relations—that is, (aptness for) paternity or maternity, “childness” (filiality), and the like—are intrinsic to the original hence abiding identity of the person.

(iv) Communion in each of the above three senses reaches to the depths of the body, with the consequence that John Paul II terms the body itself “nuptial.” The body is nuptial, in other words, because and insofar as it bears within its very physicality an aptness for the expression of community—finally, for the community recapitulated eucharistically in Jesus Christ.⁷

(v) The idea of a “nuptial body” implies definite notions of space, time, matter, and motion: now seen to be, in their original—i.e., creaturely—nature as such, apt for “containing” and expressing community, for being recapitulated in the sacrament of eucharistic love, in and through the “work” of man (Maximus the Confessor).⁸

Being a eucharistic presence at the heart of the world, in short, involves embodying, and assisting into being, community and relation in the comprehensive ways indicated.

4. The “constitutive” nature of creaturely community, and human freedom’s original meaning as grateful and giving

The decisive point is that (the order from and toward) community in each of the above five senses is *constitutive*. That is,

⁶John Paul II, “Address to the Faculty of the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family” (August, 1999), n. 5.

⁷For the cosmic dimension of the Incarnation indicated here, see John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 50. For the destined “sacramental” character of creation, precisely in its original creaturely order, see Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (St. Vladimir’s Press: Crestwood, N.Y., 1998 [1963]).

⁸See references in fn. 7.

though community in each of these senses is originally ordained to, hence brought to realization only through an exercise of, human freedom and intelligence, the relevant point is that community is first *given to* human freedom, as the always-anterior condition of human freedom. Community is not first an *object* of choice but a *gift always already given and calling forth gratitude and further giving*.

The constitutive nature of creaturely community, in short, changes human freedom from an act of choice originally empty of order into an act of choice always-anteriorly ordered by and toward gratefulness and giving, to God and to others in God.

5. *The culture of death's logic of autonomy and instrumentalism*

a. *Liberalism's "abstract" identity of the person.* Against this background, we may say that the contrasting "*structure*" characteristic of the "culture of death" consists in a logic of self-centeredness entailing a logic of the other as first an instrument or function of the self. This logic has its foundation in contemporary—Western liberal—society's "abstract" identity of the person. "Abstract" refers to the liberal tendency to conceive the identity of the person first and most basically *in abstraction from the relations constitutive of the creature* in the ways outlined in (3).

b. *Liberalism's extrinsic (originally voluntary, not constitutive) notion of community: ontological unitarianism and pelagianism.* To be sure, as already implied with respect to the earlier comments regarding the compassion and religious belief often present in liberal societies, these societies, on their best reading, affirm the need for community and relationship. The relevant point is that they do so in terms of a community and relationship conceived as first *voluntary* in nature. That is, given the view, however unwittingly adopted, that the person is constituted first in-itself-and-in-abstraction-from (relation to) others (God, family, other persons, indeed to the body itself), liberal societies can conceive community only as *extrinsic* to the self in its originally constituted identity, hence as something always to be realized first through what is now the *option* of the self. It is just this view of community as first extrinsic to the self, hence as an option of the self's freedom, that signals the ontologic of autonomy undergirding the "instrumentalist" criteria characteristic of the "culture of death."

What is identified here as an extrinsicist ontology of community and relation can be spelled out in more technical terms. (a) Ontological *unitarianism*: the self is originally-constitutionally *indifferent* to relation *with* the other; (b) ontological *pelagianism*: the self's relation to the other is (consequently) first an *enactment* or *construction* by the self; (c) *voluntarism*: the self's relation to the other is just so far *arbitrary* (because and insofar as it is not a matter of the self's *original order*); and (d) *mechanism*: the other is originally without worth *as other* (e.g., nature is originally “dumb,” and acquires its worth first as a function of the self's agency: cf. what Christian philosopher George Grant terms liberalism's “technological ontology”).

These four features together at once result in and already express the original meaning of the other as *instrument*: that is, something that is first a function of the self's having, doing, making, producing. The worth of the other is not something originally *given* to the self: not originally a gift to and for the self, in the self's original constitution as such, hence not something for which the self can from the origins of its being be grateful. On the contrary, the worth of the other is always and just so far something first to be chosen or granted *by* the self, as a (now just so far arbitrary) function of the self's interest.

6. *The (subtle) distinction between constitutive (intrinsic) and voluntary (extrinsic) community and the radical difference between the culture of life and the culture of death*

The distinction between constitutive (intrinsic) and voluntary (extrinsic) community and relation is subtle, and thus may appear arcane—too much upon which to hang the radical difference between a “culture of life” and a “culture of death.” However, we need to recall here how much that is fundamental to Christian faith has always turned on the nature of a distinction. Note, for example, how controversies regarding the *ὁμοούσιον* (Nicea), or again regarding the relation of person (*πρόσωπον*) and nature (*φύσις*) in Jesus (Chalcedon) evoked distinctions which, considered abstractly, might be judged arcane, but which were in fact necessary to determine whether there had really been an Incarnation of God in Jesus, or again whether the hypostatic union between God and man in Jesus destroyed or reduced the integrity of his humanity. It was

the distinctions in their very fineness, in other words, that *safeguarded the integrity of the concrete life of faith and worship*.

The question regarding the nature of the distinction between constitutive and voluntary in the matter of community among creatures, in relation to God in Christ and to each other, is ultimately as significant for Christians as the Nicene question concerning the distinction between Jesus and the Father, or again the Chalcedonian question regarding the distinction between (person) and (nature) in Jesus. This is so not because creatures are hypostatically united to God, but because the unique hypostatic union of God and man in Jesus itself contains the intended destiny of man and the entire cosmos, and because the Eucharist realized in the sacramental-ecclesial community itself, in Jesus and dependent upon him, likewise bears that same destiny.

In short, an extrinsic rather than constitutive relation between God-in-Christ and creatures, and among creatures themselves, *eo ipso* removes from the self's original identity its *ordering* toward trinitarian-eucharistic and (consequently) genuinely other-centered love. It thus changes the *original* meaning of creaturely community and indeed freedom from *gift* to *achievement*, thereby founding the onto-logic of autonomy (cf. unitarianism and pelagianism) that renders a civilization structurally vulnerable to a "culture of death."

7. *Liberalism's "strategic" deferral of the constitutive community entailed by a eucharistic-communion ecclesiology.*

a. *Deferral in the name of eschatology.* Christians in liberal societies often emphasize the eschatological meaning of *Gaudium et Spes*, 22, with the eucharistic-communional destiny implied therein. That is, fearing the reduction characteristic of some "liberation theologies," they stress that the Kingdom of God is to be realized fully only at the end of history. This of course is true. However, this necessarily eschatological dimension of man's trinitarian-eucharistic destiny is rightly understood only when integrated with the incarnational dimension of that destiny. Without this simultaneously incarnational dimension, the lay faithful's "secular" missionary task—to restore to creation its original value, in and through Jesus Christ—is evacuated of its substance. Heaven came to earth in Jesus, in order that earth might thereby begin already now to embody

heaven (“thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”).

b. *Deferral in the name of “realism.”* Christians in liberal societies often delay proposing community in the strong, constitutive sense indicated by a eucharistic–communion ecclesiology because it seems to be “unrealistic,” given contemporary patterns of life. But this begs the question of how the meaning of “real” and “realistic” is embodied for us in Jesus Christ, and consequently how the suffering, crucifixion, and death of Christ (and indeed the “Beatitudes” exhibited in Christ⁹) are finally indispensable in the constitution of that meaning.¹⁰ As revealed abundantly in the lives of the saints, the risk of martyrdom is a matter of the utmost realism.

c. *Deferral in the name of avoiding imposition in an age of pluralism.* Christians often delay proposing community in the strong, constitutive sense indicated by a eucharistic ecclesiology because it risks being or seeming coercive, given the democratic pluralism of modern societies. But this begs the double claim carried in John Paul II’s understanding of the missionary task as indicated in *Gaudium et Spes*, 22: namely, (i) that all human hearts—hence including human hearts in democratic societies—are created restless for the divine community revealed in Jesus Christ; and (ii) that the missionary “exigence” implied in this restlessness carries its own distinctive method, or way of freedom—a freedom which, as constitutively communal, is always already apt in its basic structure for the expression of (finally eucharistic) gratitude and gift.¹¹

d. The foregoing deferrals in the name of “strategy” are in fact not merely strategic; on the contrary, they invariably imply what is already an extrinsicist *ontology* of community, because and insofar as they all typically begin with a (liberal) notion of community and self to which a eucharistically destined community is *eo ipso*, though

⁹See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1716–17.

¹⁰An authentic “realism” must recognize from the beginning that “success is not a name of God” (M. Buber).

¹¹See, for example, *Redemptor Hominis*, 12. The method indicated here does not entail always mentioning the name of Jesus explicitly, since preaching the Gospel, as implied in GS, 22, is always a matter at once of restoring creation itself to its natural integrity. Such a method, therefore, can rightly focus on this latter task. The relevant point is simply that, in carrying out this task, one must remain ever-mindful of the eucharistic destiny implicit in creation in its original-natural constitution as such.

for different reasons in each case, always yet to be *added* (“*super-additum*”).

8. *A eucharistic-communion ecclesiology requires that the achievements of liberal societies be evaluated in terms of the distinction between constitutive and extrinsic community, or again between relational-personal identity and abstract-personal identity.*

The distinction between relational identity and abstract identity, when understood in light of the growing struggle between a “culture of life” and a “culture of death,” exposes the grave ambiguity inherent in all the positive achievements of liberal societies: those, namely, which concern the “rights” of the individual; freedom of choice; equality; the power of self-determination; the creativity of the self; community as mutual, enlightened self-interest; the technical capacities of modern medicine and science; the institutionalized freedoms of market economics and democratic politics; and so on. Each of these achievements (and each *is* a genuine achievement), insofar as it presupposes (however unconsciously) an ontologic of abstract self-identity, *eo ipso* bears within it the (ontological) seeds of its own undoing and indeed reversal. Each such achievement already bears within it a logic of inversion whereby the “powerful” and “productive” and “independent” and “functional” displace the “weak” and “unproductive” and “dependent” and “useless” (see EV, 23), contrary to what are the original and abiding best intentions of liberalism. Liberalism’s implied logic of abstract identity, or again its extrinsicist notion of community, does not *necessitate* or *determine* choices in favor of the powerful and the productive; it simply (onto-)logically, or structurally, disposes society toward such choices. What John Paul II sees as a growing culture of death testifies to the extent to which this disposition has become effective.

The increasing global influence of modern Western socio-economic institutions, viewed in light of the West’s ever-advancing biotechnological manipulation of birth, health, and death, intensifies the need for clarifying, in relation to liberalism, the distinction between relational-personal identity and abstract-personal identity, not as a matter of “academic” speculation but for the sake of living Christian faith in its integrity *at the heart of the world*. This clarification is necessary if and insofar as Christians believe the world continues

to have a trinitarian–eucharistic destiny, even within the democratic capitalistic societies of modernity. □

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