



FAITH & REASON

THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

1999-2000 | Vol. XXIV-XXV

JOHN PAUL II AS A PROPHET OF LIFE IN A CULTURE OF DEATH

Damian P. Fedoryka



MORE AND MORE OFTEN, IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF EUROPE AND IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS, one hears the common term “ours.”¹ The word indicates, on the face of it, the idea that there is something common, something that is shared, something that binds “us” together. Yet the term can hide a bitter irony, because even in affirming the bond that ties us into some unity, it can negate the individual in acts which separate him from what is “ours” and even “his.” Perhaps the best evidence of this is the strange silence about “our” children, and hence about our own humanity in the midst of all the rhetoric about what a common life and a common future are to be. Because of this silence, the category of what is “ours” becomes formally similar to that insistence on the individualistic, ethnic and nationalist “mine” and “ours” which has shown its consequences in the “Bosnian Evil.”

Abortion is a crime not only against the individual; it is a crime against humanity. Abortion separates the criminal not only from the victim but from humanity itself. By its very nature, it forces every human into solidarity with the victim, and makes each and every human being into a victim. As such, it is a symptom of the specific negation of and systematic attack against human dignity. There can be no rebuilding, no reform and no rebirth in Eastern and Central Europe, there can be no stopping of the death of Western Europe and Western Civilization, unless there first occurs a reaffirmation of the dignity of the human person. But this too is a paradox, for the salvation of a human civilization will not occur if the affirmation of human dignity is a means, a way of saving that civilization. For then human dignity will still be abused because it is used merely as a means. Our own salvation cannot be the primary end. But, in the end, our salvation will be the *consequence* of affirming human dignity as the image of God. But to do so means affirming God for His sake, not ours. The rest shall be given us.

There are a number of elements that enter into the foundation and affirmation of the dignity of man. They are all inseparable and all necessary. Yet one aspect of that dignity can serve as a focus that is particularly suited to highlight the unique and specific evil of our age as well as indicate the way to the affirmation of that dignity.

In the thought and the teachings of Pope John Paul II, who can be called “the Pope of the Dignity of Man,” that central aspect, an echo of *Gaudium et Spes* #24, is constantly affirmed as an antithesis to the spirit of the age. It is the simple but profound truth that man, as a person, has a vocation of giving himself to others and, ultimately, to God. Only a person is capable of giving himself.

In his encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, we are taught that the heart of morality is the *response of love*² in which the individual, in imitation of Christ, makes a *total gift of self*³ This repeats a central truth of *Dives in Misericordia*, in which, speaking of God’s love, John Paul II adds, “And he who loves, desires to give himself.”⁴ The decisive criterion for understanding the social dimension is the essential orientation and vocation of each individual to his “neighbor.”

And thus the key to the proper understanding of *Centesimus Annus* is a phrase that is as brief as it is rich in significance: work is “*work with and for others*.” In *Evangelium Vitae*, the Pope explicitly states that the first and most important step towards establishing a culture of life consists in forming consciences as to the proper relation between freedom and life. These two are essentially and inextricably linked by “the vocation to love. Love, as a sincere gift of self, is what gives life and freedom of the person their truest meaning.”⁵

Properly understood, the above truths are a scandal and an offense to the modern age because they affirm that man’s vocation is to *be for others*. But they lose their scandalous character if they are given a humanistic interpretation. For the humanist is willing to be an altruist inasmuch as he affirms that *self-interest* has as its *consequence* a benefit for the other.

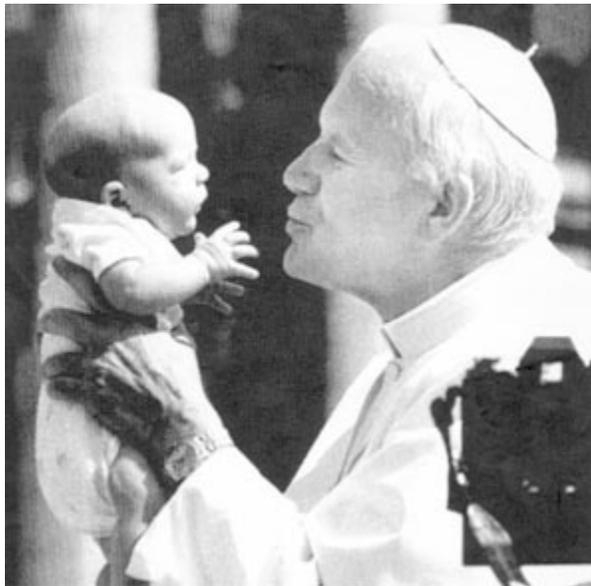
The truth about this human vocation has to be put into a perspective that is directly relevant to the age and expressed in such a way as to strip all pretense from the posture of benevolent humanism that is assumed by our age. We can do this with the two statements: First, only a person can give *himself*. Second, only a person is capable of *appropriating himself*.

The first statement is the expression of the vocation to self-donation. The second statement may, although it need not, contain the terrible possibility of perverting that vocation.

The first statement, as Wojtyla and John Paul II saw,⁶ is an expression of the situation of man: his being is a gift which calls for the reciprocity⁷ of a self-donation in gratitude to the donor, who is God. It indicates, if we understand it properly, three distinct and essentially connected moments: Man is called to receive the gift of self; he is called to *take possession of that self*; and finally, he is called to an “exchange” of gifts in the act of gratitude, which involves a giving of self.

The second statement can, though it need not, express a perversion of the human vocation, when it implies a refusal to render the gift of self. As a consequence, the act of self-possession becomes central and final, and makes receptivity impossible. In refusing to give, man also refuses to receive. Instead of receiving his own existence and the created world, the creature *appropriates* instead of receiving them,⁸ and loses possession of his own self and of the world. Yet the gesture of appropriation is not simply impotent. In its impotence it brings destruction and death to everything touched by its appropriating grasp.

Here we see the fundamental contrast and opposition of which Christ spoke in His words, “He who would save his life,” that is, keep it for himself- “will lose it; he who will lose his life, for my sake,”-that is, give it to me unconditionally “will find it.”



A sophisticated secular age promises us its “good will” if we only bracket the divine and the supernatural in our dialogue about man, about the one thing that we have in “common,” namely “our” humanity. The secular age has lost the sense of God⁹ and demands that we too reject him from public, if not private, life. This is its condition for allowing the Christian to participate in a common endeavor for the “good” of humanity.

But ecumenism and courtesy do not require and justice forbids silence about the so-called “mistakes” of and some may even say the necessary “cost” levied by the secular age on the road to human progress. For the human misery and suffering in their vast scope and monumental depth are not the result of an innocent mistake. They are, indeed, the price exacted for the progress of humanity, promised to all but accessible only to the few. One cannot be silent about the mendacity of a humanism that expects the crumbs of its own surfeited satisfaction to trickle down, as welfare, to those deprived of human dignity. Silence about the evil of the age will not lead to unity or solidarity, but only to collusion in evil.

The fundamental word of the secular age is “Mine,” as Wojtyla once noted in a sermon on “Fatherhood.” In more technical language, we can understand the issue as one of “private property.” The decisive ques-

tion, then, becomes, “To whom does man belong?” Both Christ and Marx agree that this is the crucial question. It is the first and the last question. And the answer to it determines man’s beginning and his end. But only one answer is the beginning of man, of his rebirth and life; the other brings it to an end in death. Yet both answers consist of the selfsame identical word, “Mine!”

“To whom does man belong?” Christ’s answer is “Mine.” Man belongs to Christ, for he has been purchased at a great price, the *sacrifice* in which Christ *offered* His human life in exchange for divine life for man. Christ accomplished the exchange with one liturgical word, spoken to the Father: “Thine.”

“To whom does man belong?” Marx’s answer, in the name of man, repeats the same word, “Mine!” And thus, “man” *appropriates* himself, he becomes “his own,” but only *by the theft* of what belongs to Christ and to his neighbor. It is singularly instructive that even while re-appropriating man for himself, Marx saw fit to destroy the center of individuality, that which is the most intimate and deepest property of man, his freedom. It was no longer the individual, but humanity that was to be saved.

In the Christian’s dialogue with the secular world, he can no longer ignore, under the excuse of being academic or ecumenical and open-minded, that the refusal to receive his being from God and to render it back to God as a gift, and the consequent decision to appropriate, or keep it for himself, are the direct and sole reason for the overwhelming misery and injustice suffered by men in the contemporary world.

In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II reminds this world that the *earth itself is a gift* from God.¹⁰ For the secular age the earth is merely a condition, and therefore, only a means for survival. In the same encyclical, he reminds us that man, too, is a gift to man. But here, too, the secular age proclaims the sovereignty and freedom and the rights of man, refusing to receive the gift and becoming incapable of giving it.¹¹ Only *appropriation* remains, coming to expression in the word “Mine,” the central word in the new liturgy of consumption.¹²

The real and awesome *power of man to possess himself* finds its true meaning only if it stands between the two “poles” of *receptivity* and *self-donation*. The requirement to be receptive is grounded in the origin of man. He is not merely created, he is *given* his life *as a gift* from God. The

requirement of self-donation is grounded in the *goal* and end of his life, the same God who “desired to give Himself” because He loved man. Thus, in answer to the question, “To whom does man belong?” we cannot simply *repeat* the word of Christ, as if we too were gods. Rather, we are called to *respond* to the Word of God, who says “Mine” of His own. And the “*response due* to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man” to take the words of one of the central passages from *Veritatis Splendor*¹³ the response due is the word and the act “Thine” the total gift of self.

Two reflections are in order. They concern the true nature of society and therefore have important implications for the political order and the current crisis. Both refer to the central and decisive notion of *transcendence*. In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II notes that all men have the *same* Origin and the same Goal.



Unlike animals of the same species, who have in each instance a similar origin and a similar goal, men have the same origin and goal. There are as many goals as there are individual animals. In the case of man, the goal, God, is the same one for all men. This has radical implications for understanding the social character of man, for “[i]n the other, whether man or woman, there is a reflection of God himself, the definitive goal and fulfillment of every person.”¹⁴

Being for others, giving oneself for others, makes absolutely no sense—indeed, it would be an absurdity if the other simply had an *immanent* end, namely, his own self-development and self-satisfaction. It would be inconceivable, indeed impossible, to find a reason why one would actively turn to the other *for his sake* if the other were exclusively and necessarily oriented toward self-actualization and self-satisfaction or, as it is often called today, the integral realization of human potential. Of his many creatures, man is the only one whom God created for his own sake, but only so that each individual can give himself to “the other” for the other’s sake.¹⁵ Two *self-centered* individuals can *exchange* services in the pursuit of their respective and even similar ends, forming thereby an economic institution. But, precisely inasmuch as they are self-centered, they *can never* share and *participate in each*

other's pursuit and thereby form a true community, a genuine “being-at-one-with.” Their pursuit can never be one pursuit, because they do not have one goal.

In his *Letter to Families*, the Pope’s distinction between communion and community is decisive. If we reflect on it, we can see that communion, the direct “I-Thou” relationship, in which each becomes united to the other in order to share in one life, would be impossible unless each transcended to a dimension that stands above both. The “being at one with” the other depends on the relation of each to a vertical dimension that transcends both. We can love an infant by virtue of the fact that he is an image of God, Who transcends him. But it would be difficult, indeed impossible, to give oneself in a nuptial act to an infant, or someone like an infant who has never transcended himself. The other becomes lovable in a way that allows *communion* only if he or she *responds* to the transcendent domain of truth, goodness and beauty which transcends the individual as such. To use another concept central to both *Veritatis Splendor* and *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the other becomes a “candidate” for communion only to the extent that he *conforms* himself to a transcendent reality and ultimately to Christ. The response of conformity to the transcendent makes the other lovable and visible in his inner personal secret. This same response to the transcendent makes community also possible, a community in which “*we together*” participate in each other’s response to and pursuit of the same transcendent goal. Only then is it possible to act *in solidarity*: to perform a common act, to share one life, to be one body.

The radical impoverishment of man and the isolation of individual from individual cannot be overcome by a capitalism “correctly understood” as “democratic.” The democratization of capitalism will at most allow every self-centered individual to enter into a market where he *can exchange* goods and services. The fact that “other centered” individuals are also free to enter into the same market seems to justify the “democratization” of capitalism. Such a proposal, increasingly and effectively publicized in Eastern Europe to include the Holy Father’s native land, claims to find justification in John Paul II’s reference to a “capitalism” as a market or business economy circumscribed by a strong juridical framework.¹⁶ The Pope’s caveat that such a market economy is to be in the service of “human freedom in its totality” is also incorporated into the proposal as a justification of the “new capitalism.” It is unfortunate, however, that even in its stress on service to human freedom in its totality the

proposal fails to include yet another, even more important, element in *Centesimus Annus*. John Paul II explicitly states that “*even prior to the logic of fair exchange* and the forms of justice appropriate to it, there exists something that is due to man because he is man, by reason of his lofty dignity.”¹⁷ It is in that same section and immediately prior to this passage that the Pope affirms the free market as the most effective instrument for utilizing resources and responding to needs on the level of *individual nations and international relations*. But apparently, when it comes to the *individual man*, the situation is not the same as it is for individual *nations* and international relations for, the Pope goes on, the fact that the free market is the most effective instrument for utilizing resources “is true only for those needs which are ‘solvent,’ in so far as they are endowed with purchasing power, and for those resources which are marketable in so far as they are capable of obtaining a satisfactory price. *But there are many needs which find no place in the market. It is a strict duty of justice and truth not to allow fundamental human needs to remain unsatisfied.*”¹⁸ The justice here in question is not the justice proper to the “logic of fair exchange,” but rather the justice of that which is due to man prior to the logic of fair exchange. The simple insistence on the juridical circumscription of the free market and its institutions, can, unfortunately, gloss over and even implicitly reject the justice of what is “due to man because he is man” by relegating the “non-marketable” needs to private morality and charity. In *Evangelium Vitae*, John Paul II again draws our attention to the replacement of that which is “due to man as man” with what is “marketable”: “The criterion of personal dignity which demands respect, 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.’”¹⁹

The civil and secular order, as is abundantly evident in our secularized culture, has rejected the dimension of vertical transcendence between man and God as well as the horizontal transcendence between man and man.²⁰ Our current political and social structures are articulated on the implicit and increasingly more explicit premise that man lives *for himself*, with the inevitable consequence that only the most powerful ones are able to do so with any satisfaction. Any “cooperation” resolves itself in economic terms as an *exchange*.²¹ These same structures, and the culture of consumerism which they facilitate, make it increasingly difficult to live actively for the other and to educate one’s children to do so. Thus, we witness the overwhelming role of the concept of “rights”

which allows only the unconditional “Mine” of appropriation and consumption but makes it difficult or impossible to realize the “Thine” of self-donation.

The State, unlike the Church, has no direct role and no competence in the inner word, “Thine,” which accompanies the act of self-giving. The specific mission of the State is justice, the defense and protection of that which is legitimately “mine.” But the State’s limited competence and mission does not and should not allow it to *abolish* that dimension of transcendence which is essential to the proper understanding of human nature. In other words, simply because the State does not have the temporal power or competence to enforce man’s obligation to receive what has been given to him as a gift and to give it as a gift to others, *does not mean that it can bracket receptivity and self-donation as if they were nonexistent.* When the secular order rejects receptivity and self-giving—this two-fold matrix and foundation for authentic self-possession—it radically perverts the meaning of self-possession into a simple and unconditional “right” to appropriation. The political consequences of this are structures that dispossess and expropriate from man what is truly given to him and is truly his own.²²

The practical consequence of bracketing *receptivity and self-donation* as integral aspects of human existence and as the foundation of society is a strict exclusion of the *origin and the goal* of human existence from public life. And that is a crime. Such bracketing is also a strict and formal exclusion of the other as source and goal of human life. It *destroys parenthood*, which is the source of a community and common life, and it *destroys marriage* as the “embodiment” of the highest form of mutual self-giving. This too is a crime.

It has become progressively clearer that the radical divergence in the understanding of man’s call and destiny makes dialogue increasingly difficult between Christianity and the secular age. The criminal activity of the age is hidden behind a “human face” and a love of “humanity,” which cannot, however, disguise a hatred of God.

With the impossibility of dialogue and persuasion, the alternative is clear. It must take the way of the

response due to God and neighbor, not only in the inner word of *conformity* to both but also in the *external action* of self-donation. This action must and can take place, at this time, only on the individual level. On that individual level it will have to be an imitation of Christ, who ransomed those who were His own, exchanging His life for ours. Here too we have an exchange, but of a different logic, for it was not fair even though it fulfilled the requirements of divine justice. And it was not Christ but man who profited in this exchange. We too are called to give up something of ourselves *in order to ransom* those whose lives are being appropriated and consumed by the secular age. Only then will the foundations be laid for a new community in which the members can also be bound in a free communion with others because they *give themselves to*, rather than consume, the others.


“We too are called to give up
something of ourselves in order
to ransom those whose lives are
being appropriated and consumed
by the secular age.”


At the end of *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II speaks of the “need to *develop a deep critical sense*, capable of discerning true values and authentic needs”²³ in the context of the dramatic struggle between the cultures of life and death. Earlier in the encyclical, he had already identified the core of the drama: the loss of the sense of God and therefore also of the sense of man. At the encyclical’s close, he returns to the affirmation that “at the heart of every culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God.”²⁴ Perhaps it would be appropriate to conclude this article with a response to the challenge of developing that critical sense by reflecting on one aspect of the mystery of God.

Something of the mystery of God, of the *attitude due* to God, and therefore something of the mystery and dignity that belongs to man, is captured in a profoundly rich and significant passage of *Evangelium Vitae*. After quoting Genesis 1:26 on the creation of man in the image and likeness of God, John Paul II notes: “*The life which God offers to man is a gift by which God shares something of himself with his creature.*”²⁵ God is Father, not merely Creator, because he gives Himself to man already in creating him.²⁶ We gain a deeper insight into the dignity of man and the meaning of his life. He is made in the image and likeness of God. But more than this: God gives himself to man. And by the “law of reciprocity,” He demands a return of the gift as a “sincere gift of self.” The Fatherhood of God by virtue of filiation through Fatherhood

of God by virtue of filiation through Baptism is anticipated already in creation and the self-giving of God to man. Thus, man and woman become parents by a “certain special participation” in the “creative work” of God. John Paul II elucidates this reference to *Gaudium et Spes* #50, by repeating an emphasis made in his Letter to Families: “God Himself is present in human fatherhood and motherhood...”²⁷ Thus, the significance of human procreation, “which clearly reveals that human life is a gift in order to be given as a gift,”²⁸ must be understood not only against the background of the mutual gift of self of the spouses but against the more fundamental self-giving of God in the creation of man.

What is the implication of this for understanding the culture of death, and above all, for the Christian’s “commerce” with the culture of death?

In the final sections of *Evangelium Vitae*, John Paul II states that the “rejection of human life, in whatever

form that rejection takes, is really a rejection of Christ.”²⁹ Abortion, then, is a radical rejection of God, and this on two counts: once, because we reject Christ in Whom and through Whom God the Father gave Himself to man, and once again, even more fundamentally, because we reject God the Father Who gives Himself to the creature in every procreation. Striking against the very source and beginning of life, abortion is not merely a symptom but also the embodiment of the culture of death. It would be a mistake to perceive in the current drama simply the death of a culture. Cultures have died in the past. What is at stake is the very meaning of human life: “that of being a gift which is fully realized in the giving of self.”³⁰ If human life is realized in the giving of it, then it must be negated in the appropriating and keeping of it.

The central characteristic of the spirit of death which forms our culture is the attitude of appropriation and consumption. It is this attitude which forms society into structures of exchange, where human needs have a market value, and into structures of oppression, where they do not. The attitude of appropriation and consum-

ption is simply and necessarily the obverse of that attitude which rejects God as Father, namely, as the source and the goal of human life. As Christianity in the past once formed culture and society, so too the spirit of appropriation and consumption now forms contemporary culture.

What must be the response of the Christian to the culture of death which surrounds him and permeates everything with its ethos? He can only respond by taking the attitude that is *due* to the mystery of God: a total gift of self to God, the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit. The obverse of this attitude is a categorical rejection of the culture of death. It must be noted: this is a rejection of the culture, not of one’s neighbor who is consumed by the same culture. It is no longer a question of participating in a flawed or imperfect culture, whose structures are simply to be perfected by a juridical framework. The Christian dare not enter into a free market serving the spirit of death, a “free” market in which “everything is nego-



Karol Wojtyla

tiabile, everything open to bargaining: even the first of the fundamental rights, the right to life.”³¹ The democratization of the market place is no longer a viable solution, for “the fundamental negotiability of human life effectively moves democracy towards totalitarianism.”³² It seems that, given the monopoly of the merchants of death in the market place, the Christian must refrain from doing commerce with those who deal in human life. Expressed in a positive mode, he has the opportunity and perhaps even the obligation of creating an alternative market and economy while he still has the freedom to do it. This seems to be clearly implied by the following words of John Paul II:

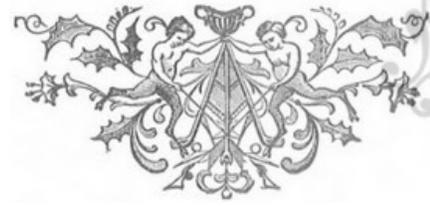
In a word, we can say that the cultural change which we are calling for demands from everyone the courage to *adopt a new life style*, consisting in making practical choices at the personal, family, social and international level on the basis of a correct scale of values: *the primacy of being over having, of persons over things.*³³

In an immediately following passage the Pope notes that no one need feel excluded in the mobilization

for a culture of life. It is left to us to discern the implications of this. If one adopts the new life style the Pope is calling for, it should also be apparent that those who do so will be excluded by the consumer culture. For the principle expressed in an earlier encyclical applies to our culture: "A society is *alienated if its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer this gift of self* and to establish this solidarity between people."¹⁴ If John Paul II is right in his judgment that at the core of the drama is a rejection of God as the source of life, any attempt to form communities and social structures in such a way that they facilitate rather than hinder the gift of self will be seen as a deadly threat to the culture of death, and will be dealt with accordingly. Death has its own inner logic and its own integrity: it is the one thing that is non-negotiable in the market it sponsors. In such a market the exchange of goods is not in the service of the gift of life. Rather, life and personal freedom are the currency demanded in exchange for the satisfaction of greed. If indeed it is the life of any individual that is at stake, one cannot refuse to let him enter into the market; indeed, one is obliged to assist him by virtue of what is due to him inasmuch as he is man, even if his need is not solvent in the market. But as long as greed and the consumption of what satisfies but is not necessary for life rules the market place, the Christian may have the opportunity, perhaps even the obligation, to establish solidarity also with those who have adopted the new life style called for by the Holy Father. The unconditional commitment to life" and the service of life must also be consistent with its own inner logic. Will those saved from abortion, as well as our own children, have the opportunity to grow up not only in families but in a society whose social and economic structures makes it easier for each to receive life as a gift and for each to give it as a gift? Only if they do will it become easier for them also to take the proper attitude to God: *Totus tuus!*

But this would seem to imply that in the present circumstances of our prevailing consumer culture we can no longer "do business as usual," but must needs form new and alternate communities. Such communities will be seen as radical; they will be "alternate" and "alien" to the culture of the age not because the Christian has separated himself but rather because soon enough he will be rejected and persecuted by the culture of death. When that moment comes, it will call for the courage of martyrs. But because the lives of innocents are at stake, it would be foolish to let it come without preparing for it, as a wise general does for a campaign the Pope calls for

a "great campaign in support of life"³⁶ -by forming communities animated by the new life style.



This imperative is clearly stated by the Pope. He calls for a renewal of a culture of life within Christian communities themselves. Nor does he shy away from a harsh and realistic-albeit indirect judgment, not merely of a culture of death in the abstract, but of the actual extent of that culture. Thus he directs the judgment at Christians, since the culture of death cannot be the source of its own negation, much less "renewal": "With great openness and courage, we need to question how widespread is the culture of life today among individual Christians, families, groups and communities in our dioceses."³⁷

It seems clear that there can be a renewal of a culture of life only where it has not yet died. We can speak of a renewal in Christian communities only to the extent that they still draw their life from the Father of Life. But it is significant that the Pope does not speak of the "renewal" of the contemporary culture in general. He begins paragraph #95 of *Evangelium Vitae* with a quotation from Ephesians which includes the injunction "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness." Then, speaking of the present social context not of Christian communities which are called to renewal he affirms the imperative to build a "new culture of life" and notes the "urgent need for such a cultural transformation."

The Pope is saying what many of us perhaps find difficult to recognize and painful to admit: the Christian who would receive the gift of life from the Father and fulfill the law of reciprocity by giving it back to Him through Christ, in Christ and with Christ, has been effectively separated from the prevailing culture. Whatever the shortcomings of the Christian which call for his inner renewal, it is also a fact that he can no longer partake of the culture of death. The culture of death cannot be renewed or reanimated. It must be replaced or transformed, i.e., acquire a new form or animating principle. Only when we become clear about this will we be able to respond to another task noted by the Pope: "With equal clarity and determination we must identify the steps we are called to take in order to serve life in all its truth." The encyclical ends with an outline of these steps, but they

all predicated upon the reality of a “dramatic struggle” between life and death, not upon the assumption of a merely sick or dying culture that can still be reanimated and renewed.

The prophetic character of John Paul II’s teachings and exhortations comes into focus and acquires its historical timeliness in the emphasis on man’s vocation to love, a vocation which is realized only in the total gift of self to God. This prophetic dimension is confirmed by the fact that it appears to be a lonely—indeed often the only—voice, sometimes but barely and only timidly echoed by other pastors, raised against the decisive mark of the spirit of the age which rejects God and refuses to give

itself. Thus, the penultimate paragraph #104 of *Evangelium Vitae* ends with a focus on the two dimensions of receptivity and self-donation which form the proper context for man’s self-possession. The age rejects human life, but “*rejection of human life*, in whatever form that rejection takes, *is really a rejection of Christ.*” The age refuses both to receive what Christ offers and to give the gift of self to Him. This basic and fundamental truth is revealed by Christ himself and proclaimed by the Church: “Whoever receives one such child in my name, receives me” (Mt. 18:15) and “Truly, I say to you, as you did to one of the least of these brethren, you did it to me” (Mt. 25:40).



NOTES

1This is an expanded version of a paper presented at a conference in May, 1994 at the Catholic University of Lublin (Poland) on “John Paul II and the Future of Europe,” and published under the title “The Rebirth or Death of Europe?” in *ETHOS*, Special Edition No. 2, 1996, 125-131.

2John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (6 August 1993), Vatican translation: *The Splendor of Truth* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, n.d.), #10.

3 *Ibid.*, #15, *passim*.

4John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* (30 November 1980), Vatican translation: *Rich in Mercy* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, n.d.), #7.

5John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), #96.

6Tadeusz Styczen and Edward Balawajder, *Jedynie Prawda Wyzwala, Rozmowy o Janie Pawle II* (Roma: Polski Instytut Kultury Chrześcijańskiej, 1987), 35.

7Many years later this intuition is reaffirmed in the context of the “law of reciprocity” in *Evangelium Vitae*, #76, 92.

8 See *Evangelium Vitae*, #83, where the Pope speaks of the contemplative attitude necessary for Christians. This attitude “is the outlook of those who do not presume to take possession of reality but instead accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person his living image.” Thus the central mark of the culture of death is the refusal to receive life which is entrusted to us under the “law of reciprocity” (#75). It is significant that the “taking of life” that is abortion is a direct linguistic parallel to the “taking possession” which refuse to receive a gift. The taking possession which refuse to receive, and therefore also to give is a direct echo of the “appropriation” which identifies lust in the Pope’s second cycle of talks presented under the title *Blessed are the Pure of Heart*, on July 23 and July 30, 1980. See John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body, Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997).

9 *Ibid.*, #21, where the Pope identifies the heart of the contemporary tragedy as “the eclipse of the sense of God and of man” (emphasis in the original).

10John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1 May, 1991), Vatican translation: *On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, n.d.), #37.

11See *Evangelium Vitae*, #76 where the Pope speaks about the gift of life and the responsibility for the lives of others: “The God of the Covenant has entrusted the life of every individual to his or her fellow human beings,

brothers and sisters, according to the law of reciprocity in giving and receiving, of self-giving and of acceptance of others.... Christ gives new content and meaning to the law of reciprocity, to our being entrusted to one another.” The importance of this “law of reciprocity,” grounded in the vocation of each individual to make a “sincere gift of self” to others, is central to the encyclical and is again explicitly invoked in #92: procreation is a unique event “which clearly reveals that *human life is a gift received in order then to be given as a gift*” (emphasis in the original).

12See *Evangelium Vitae*, #22, where the Pope speaks of the consequence of the loss of the sense of God: “Life itself becomes a mere ‘thing,’ which man claims as his exclusive property, completely subject to his control and manipulation.”

13*Veritatis Splendor* #9.

14*Evangelium Vitae*, #35.

15See *Gaudium et Spes*, #24.

16See *Centesimus Annus*, #42.

17*Ibid.*, #34; emphasis added.

18 *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

19*Evangelium Vitae*, #23.

20See *Centesimus Annus*, #7, in which John Paul II indicates that atheism is one of the sources of error about the person and the “subjectivity” of society. He clearly notes that in the response to the call of God, man realizes his transcendent dignity. At the same time, a rejection of God leads to a reorganization of society.

21See *Evangelium Vitae*, # 19, in which the Pope focuses on a situation in which each individual takes as point of reference his selfish interest: “[S]ociety becomes a mass of individuals placed side by side, but without any mutual bonds. Each one wishes to assert himself independently of the other and in fact intends to make his own interests prevail. Still, in the face of others people’s analogous interests, some kind of compromise must be found, if one wants a society in which the maximum possible freedom is guaranteed to each individual. In this way, any reference to common values and to a truth absolutely binding on everyone is lost, and social life ventures on the shifting sands of complete relativism. At that point, *everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargaining*: even the first of the fundamental rights, the right to life.” Such a commercialized exchange society could very well insist on the “logic of fair exchange” and ignore or even deny the right to life, the respect for which is due to man in as much as he is man, categorically excluding the category of “exchange.”

22See *Centesimus Annus*, #41, where John Paul II explicitly ties the vocation of self-donation to social structures: “As a person he can give himself to another person or to other persons, and ultimately to God, who is the author of his being and who alone can fully accept his gift. A man is *alienated if he refuses to transcend himself and to live the experience of self-giving* and of the formation of an authentic human community oriented towards his final destiny, which is God. A society is *alienated if its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer this gift of self and to establish this solidarity between people*” (emphasis added).

23*Evangelium Vitae*, #95.

24*Ibid.*, #96, quoting *Centesimus Annus*.

25*Ibid.*, #35; emphasis in original.

26See *Dives in Misericordia*, #7: “God, as Christ has revealed Him, does not merely remain closely linked with the world as the creator and the ultimate source of existence. He is also Father: *He is linked to man*, whom He called into existence in the visible world, *by a bond still more intimate than that of creation*. It is love which not only creates the good but also grants participation in the very life of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *For he who loves desires to give himself* (emphasis added).

27*Evangelium Vitae*, #43; emphasis in original.

28*Ibid.*, #92; emphasis in original.

29*Ibid.*, #104; emphasis in original.

30*Ibid.*, #49; emphasis in original.

31*Ibid.*, #20; emphasis in the original.

32*Ibid.*

33*Ibid.*, #98; emphasis in original.

34*Centesimus Annus*, #41.

35See *Evangelium Vitae*, #28, in which, speaking of the enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, the culture of death and the culture of life, the Pope writes: “We find ourselves not only faced with but necessarily in the midst of this conflict: we are involved and we all share in it, with the inescapable responsibility of *choosing to be unconditionally pro-life*” (emphasis in original).

36Ibid., #95.

37Ibid.

