

Culture of Life, Culture of Death; and the Family

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Bear with me if I start with some ideas which may not seem very much to the point of our topic, but which are in fact.

On Easter Day 1999, John Paul II dedicated a Letter to Artists; "to all who are passionately dedicated to the search for new *epiphanies* of beauty so that through their creative work as artists they may offer these as gifts to the world".

I don't know how grateful the world is for the gifts modern artists are making to it [1]; and I am not sure how much most modern artists look on their works as "epiphanies of beauty", as revelations of something marvelous to be found behind the appearances of things.

Even when so many contemporary artistic creations are not just imitations, they express little that is unique. They can be abstract to the point of being expressionless; static or just mechanical; and if their subjects are human, they are often contortedly so. I don't know if it is going too far to say that most modern art seems to be the self-expression of people who have little of value to express, no beauty, no originality, no epiphanies of inner life, no revelation of anything worth revealing; the self-assertion of people whose very assertions are close to denials.

There comes to my mind Ernest Hemingway's advice to a young man who wondered if he could be creative enough to be a good writer. "No one really knows what's inside him until he tries to draw it out. If there is nothing there, the shock may kill him". Many people have little inside, and are afraid to be creators lest they find they have nothing to draw out of themselves.

Creativity

It was also Hemingway, speaking of the artistic urge, who said: "you make something through your invention..., and you make it alive, and if you make it well enough, you give it immortality" (Hemingway, *Writers at Work*, 1963).

How hollow is the modern celebration of life - when it only believes in mortality, not in immortality. To believe in death, to believe that with death everything definitively dies is not to believe in life. The only value I see in my own life is that its satisfactions outweigh its pains - for the time being. The moment that is no longer so, I can terminate it. As for the life of others, if they help *me*, fine. If not, I see no worth in them; they, like me, like everything, are dispensable.

The culture of death is fostered by all those who don't trust life, who are afraid of life: afraid to care for the life of the old and even more afraid to give life to the young; to admire old life and to create young life.

Let me put in a word for my agemates first. The Pope announces a prayer intention for each month. The intention for September 2004 was: "That old people may be considered an asset for the spiritual and human growth of society". An asset? But old people don't make life "grow"... - Or do they? They are unproductive... - Or are they?

The Pope himself incarnates the point of his own prayer intention. What an asset his old age is proving to be to the world! What strength in his "decrepitude"! What keeps the Pope going? That he wants to hold on to "power"? That he just won't surrender to death? Is it just an ideological 'won't let the side down' attitude? A conservative as opposed to a liberal stance? That he won't be conquered by death? For him - as for everyone who really believes the Gospel - death is not defeat but victory!

Eu-thanasia means a 'good' death. But death is not good if it is an absolute full stop, followed by eternal blank spaces. The Pope wants a good death, when and as God wants it (there can be none better). He wants a good death and so he is fighting the good fight to the end - beyond which lies the good life without end, eternal life. He is teaching us an unforgettable lesson that has to be spelled out very clearly. We are not truly pro-life unless we are clearly pro *eternal* life: 1000% so. That is ultimately what we are talking about; and if people in general don't realize that *that* is what really moves us, then we are not going to do them much good.

From old age let us turn to young age, to youth. It is in the home where life begins and is meant to grow. Are our homes focal points of life - which also means of youth and energy and joy and optimism? Or is there a lifelessness precisely there, where life should be at its most expressive? Do we have too many devitalized and depersonalized homes? One family just like another; one couple (a man and a woman, we hope), two children; all hooked together on TV or separately on internet, and the same next door and next door and right down to the end of the street. Are you aware of the greatness of the project God is proposing to you: the creation of a family markedly stamped with the culture of life, with a burgeoning personality, with something humanly and divinely original to it?

Creativity and pro-creativity

Western society is withering for lack of true human creativity. Our art is not always ugly, but so much of it gives the impression of being *sterile*: not born of life and not giving birth to life. Ours is a culture of "trivia". But life is not meant to be trivial or barren. It should be an

adventure in carrying on creation, with all of the unique originality that attaches to what is really new, what is truly innovative, what has not been seen before.

In his Letter, the Pope notes that "In so far as it seeks the beautiful, fruit of an imagination which rises above the everyday, art is by its nature a kind of appeal to mystery"; and he remarks on how this sense of mystery is necessarily lost in our modern world where a new humanism "marked by the absence of God and often by opposition to God has gradually asserted itself" (no. 10).

Human creativity, disconnected from a sense of God, cannot be great. It loses its real dimension of mystery, its ability to open new horizons to people, a consciousness of the larger dimensions of life. Any great creative work draws people *upwards*, opening them to beauty and to the fullness of beauty which is God.

Some of the most inspiring artistic creations are joint works: a choir, an orchestra, a ballet, a pair of figure skaters. In the line of John Paul II's thought, one could say that the harmony of several persons contributing to one work reflects the mystery of trinitarian creativity.

Human and spousal *pro*-creativity has a totally unique significance in this sense. It is the achievement of two artists together who create a joint work of love endowed with immortality. Today we are beginning to see a procreativity marked by an absence of God; a scientific technique to be controlled or manipulated, but totally bereft of mystery or greatness or beauty. Procreativity, for God, is an artistic task that is a most direct participation in the artistry of God, and is an epiphany or revelation of God's life and love. In the divine adventure of having children the spouses wield God's own creative power. No artist, no scientist, can act on that level; parents can.

The Pope in his Letter, presents God in a sense as the Great Artist who, in creating, saw that what he had created was good - and also beautiful (no. 3). If I am not sure how many artists the Pope's letter may inspire, it is also because I am not sure if most modern artists really regard their work as *beautiful*. Perhaps the only artists who consistently do so are parents - as they look at the child born of their creative enterprise: "What a beautiful child!" Friends and neighbors agree externally, though maybe with interior reservations. But God always applauds, and has no reservations.

Visit any museum of modern art and when you come out count the artistic pieces you saw that really lifted your soul to some sense of God. Then on your way home, count the works of art you meet in the street. They are there, all over the place: God's own creations. God's children, disfigured and all, but in some way bearing his image. You and I can't see it? Then we are not looking with the eyes of God. Our vision has become dulled and we have lost the sense of the value of each individual human life. We are not quite as pro-life as we thought!

Then go home and contemplate the work of art you and God have created in each of your children. There is life and mystery and eternal value in each child. Each child is a masterpiece, with an image of God stamped uniquely on it. "Reflections of the divine" - that is what people are.

I live in Africa and there, with so much poverty and yet with so many smiling faces, I am reminded much more of God and of the heart of happiness than in Europe or America with so much (shall I appear cynical?) glittering glamor and happy hollowness, with so many people wanting to be loved and not finding love, because they are afraid to love, wanting to live and being afraid to give life.

Where is pro-choice heading?

Now let us turn more directly to the contrast proposed in our title: culture of life, culture of death. One of the most dramatic moments in the Old Testament is when Moses, in the name of God, challenges the people. "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live" (Deut 30:19). We live in no less dramatic a moment, and the Pope is putting the alternative to us just as starkly: life and death, blessing and curse - what a disjunction!

We have no doubt where we stand; we are clearly pro-life. And we know that pro-choice is not just pro-abortion; it is pro-death, on an ever expanding scale. The elimination of unwanted human beings - which it defends as a moral choice and claims as a legal right - carries in it an impetus which does not stop at aborting the unborn and unwanted child. Its logic knows no age limit. Once accepted it extends itself inexorably to infanticide, to compulsory "thanasia", to the elimination of the unfit. Pro-choice is thoroughly seeped in the culture of death!

Then how thoroughly are you steeped in the culture of life? Is to be "pro-life" just to be anti-*abortion*? How would you characterize a truly pro-life person? Someone ready to come out of their comfortable corner, ready to do battle, ready for door-to-door campaigning, for January marches in sub-zero temperature, for financial sacrifice?... Ready for anything more?

Mother Teresa's approach to unwanted life was more radical, more artistic, more creative. Her care for unborn and defenseless life grew out of her care for born but unwanted life - the good-for-nothing tramps and derelicts of the big cities. Then she turned to the babies. You don't want a baby? I want it, and will take it. And she was serious. If people had taken her up she would have adopted the whole world of unwanted babies, and if she couldn't give them a home she would have *found* them a home.

Could we not activate pro-life even more through promoting adoption? There are many childless couple who, instead of being auxiliary but paying guinea-pigs to costly scientific experiments of doubtful moral worth or human dignity, could, I feel, be easily enough persuaded to adopt one, or even two, unwanted babies. Only one or two? But that is two babies formerly unwanted and now with a home.

A few years ago I visited a nephew of mine in North Carolina. After ten years of married life without children - which they really wanted - he and his wife had adopted a six-month old Mexican girl. I remarked to them, "I hope you plan on getting her a brother or sister before too long". My nephew, then a Ph.D. student and a part-time university teacher, came back: "Eh, take it easy. You know how much it cost us just to adopt Amelia?... \$20.000!..." A truly international pro-life organization could make it possible for many childless couples to adopt one or two or three children, for much less money.

One or two or three; and not over-spaced. Because some parents seem not to realize how certain family planning approaches, moral and all, may be anything but wise educationally. Take a family where the oldest is 14 or 15, the second 9, and the third 4. In such a home there is not enough real rough and tumble; the children are not close enough for proper rivalry or jealousy to develop between them; given such separation in age, they cannot be near equals in the important matter of family fighting and family learning-to-make up - which, precisely because it demands humility, cements sibling relations just as it cements relations between spouses. If parents don't face up to the challenging task of getting their children to be really forgiving and close, I doubt there will be growing forgiveness and closeness between the parents themselves.

As we said earlier, each human person, whether new-born child or senior citizen, is a "reflection of the divine". Are we totally immune from the modern secular mentality that there are already too many "reflections"? Are we going to be as short-sighted as that, and fail not only to preach the sacredness of life in general, but to discover the treasure of each life in particular?

It is sometimes said that the desire for self-perpetuation is dying out. I understand (it is a terrible thing to understand) that some people's self-esteem is so negative that they do not want to give rise to another person that might be like them . It is a sign of total lovelessness. But the person who falls in love, truly in love, forgets self, forgets self-esteem and begins to find a new esteem not only for the one they love, but for others and for life itself. Love alone gives real sense and new value to life. That is why a first natural desire of two persons in love is to perpetuate their love - in a child that is the fruit of their love-union. But this seems worthwhile if the parents' life is worthwhile: not just because of what they are but even more because of what

they hope to be. It is only natural that parents who hope for Heaven, hope for children, also made for heaven.

We don't want abortion; we don't want death. But do we want and love life as we should? "Everyone has an obligation to be at the service of life", John Paul II reminds us (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 79): a service which is love, which is appreciation and warmth and welcome. Can we repeat that phrase of Chesterton which I would almost dare to say is a reflection of God's own "pro-life" outlook: "I wonder whether there will ever come a time when I shall be tired of any one person". How interested am I in people? How open to them? Or do I at times get tired with them, with my children too? Yes, at times they are a burden. Our Lord too felt the burden of people when He bothered with them and you and me on the Cross, out of love.

You are bound to get cross with your children at times, and even to feel you are fed up with them. It passes. But the couple, or the family, that really feels bored with each other, is entering deep crisis.

Too many people killing; not enough giving life

The signs of the "culture of death" are far too obvious. Too many people killing. It is all around us. The phenomenon of abortion: giving death to others. That of euthanasia: giving death to oneself. And the no less (but no more) terrible phenomenon of suicide-terrorists, where people's "values" have become so warped that they are prepared to die, not out of hatred for their own life, but for hatred for the lives of others...

In this culture of death we see too many people killing; and also perhaps not enough giving people life or being a home for life. Does the culture of life not invite us to consider this point too?

The pro-life challenge is not just to protect the unborn and unwanted child from being eliminated, but also to find a home for it where it will be wanted; perhaps to *be* that home. And (it seems, but is not, almost superfluous to say it) not just through adopting children unwanted by others, but through having those children of your own that you yourself are perhaps tempted not to want.

In a recent conversation with a Canadian friend, father of a young family of seven, I was struck by the unintended irony of a comment made to his wife by a very active Pro-Life worker. "Why don't you say "enough" - seven is surely more than enough! - and then you can join Pro-Life with us?" Her reply - but I have already joined it! She felt herself fully involved in the most creative human work possible. She might not describe herself as an artist but of course she is, although she is probably unaware of how a paragraph of the Pope's letter applies to her and her husband: "In producing a work, artists express themselves to the point where their work

becomes a unique disclosure of their own being, of *what they are* and of *how they are what they are*... Works of art speak of their authors; they enable us to know their inner life, and they reveal the original contribution which artists offer to the history of culture" (no. 2). You married couples: to what extent is the culture of life unfolding in your home? To what extent is your house filled with original works of art that speak of the quality of your own inner life?

Will one more child or two more plunge you into deep water? Really deep water. Well, perhaps that's where we all need to be. Or have we not yet taken to heart the optimistic motto, drawn from the Gospel, that John Paul II proposed to us as we set out on the Third Millennium "Duc in altum!" - Launch out into deep water... (Ap. Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 1)

Natural Family Planning, and big-heartedness

Thank God for Natural Family Planning! Nature has provided for situations (and they are not infrequent today) where God too would agree that it is not wise to have another child, where He agrees, so to speak, that it is not the moment to offer another life to Him or to the world. The Church has consistently taught, and continues to teach [2], that the practice of natural family planning calls for serious reasons - which are often enough present today, such as acute shortage of housing space (two- or one-roomed houses are not infrequent in Africa), serious health or financial problems. The Church encourages each couple to *pray*, so as to discern, with God, if those reasons apply to them; and if they do, to practice NFP - but to do so reluctantly. After all, it is hard to conceive how a truly pro-life couple can decide to limit the children they bring into the world other than with reluctance. Because to have fewer children is always a reduction of true family vitality. Perhaps the point can be made more clearly if we say that to avoid having another child, is always a *privation*.

First of all it is a privation humanly speaking, and that in many senses:

- a privation for the spouses themselves because they are deprived of one more unique expression and bond of their married love. But not only that. They have missed a unique opportunity. All human artists are immortal; but their works are not. The artists will live for ever (for good or bad, like all of us), but their works will perish. Not so with the artistic creations of parents. Their work, their children, will truly be immortal. They are destined to live for ever, and to be the crown and glory of their parents in Heaven.

- a privation for the existing children, for they will have among them one less incarnated image of God with whom to struggle and in whom eventually to discover another (epiphany) reflection of the divine. I would suggest to spouses who too easily incline to family limitation, to recall John Paul II's reminder to them: "it is certainly less serious to deny their children certain comforts or material advantages than to deprive them of the presence of brothers and sisters,

who could help them to grow in humanity and to realize the beauty of life at all its ages and in all its variety" [3].

- a privation for society which needs all the possible life-proud expressions of the dynamism of large families which are the only truly effective schools of fraternity, tolerance, forgiveness and understanding.

In the second place it can also be a privation on the supernatural level for it may be saying No to a child that God *did* want, a child for whom God also wished, as He wishes for you and me, the gift of eternal life, of Heaven. In God's plans, so to speak, there may remain gaps, spaces empty for eternity, that were meant to be filled with life - and life was not given.

I don't despise the argument that the child a couple may be hesitating about having may be another Beethoven or Einstein. But the real point is that (if God cooperates) he or she will be a child of God. Will we have another child of God? Will God give us another child? Will we give God another child?

Your children are not just yours; they are God's too. That is why you have to plan with Him. As you know, the only proper family planning decisions are taken in prayer.

If we want to be truly Christian, there is no way we can escape that question: what does God want of *me*? How much does He want of me, of us? The answer is clear: he wants the lot. After all, the first Commandment for each of us is to love God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind. When you get the temptation to think that God is asking too much, don't try to bargain with Him, to whittle Him down. Let me tell you a story about the Pope and a little girl called Giuseppina, oldest daughter of some good Italian friends of mine. It was Summer 1999 and she was then some seven years old. One Saturday the parents told their three children, "Tomorrow we are going to see the Pope at Castelgandolfo [outside Rome, where he holds his summer audiences], and we should take him some little gift". The gift was there: some candies they had just received. So Giuseppina found a nice little basket and claimed the right to offer them to the Pope. The family managed to be in the front row during the Audience, and at the end when the Pope moved along that row greeting the people, Giuseppina darted under the arms of one of the Swiss Guards, ran up to the Pope and, holding out the basket, said, "Santo Padre, ne vuole uno?": "Holy Father, do you want one?". The Pope looked at her with a smile, and in that deep voice which he could still use in all its expressiveness, replied: "Uno? Ne voglio tutti!" "One? I want the lot!". The little girl turned towards her parents in surprise and half-complaint: "Ne vuole tutti!" - "He wants the lot!" The parents laughingly encouraged her: "Dai, dai". And she gave the lot. I wonder if she will ever think she lost out on that one.

How much is God asking of you? Another child? Two more? I wouldn't know. It's between you and God. Would you love that extra child or two? Would your present children

learn to love him or her as a gift of God? There lies your challenging task as parents. If you are pro-life to that extent, your children too will make tomorrow's world more pro-life. But, you may say, it is easier for the children to want the baby because they don't know the burdens... Is it a question just of burdens or rather a question of values? Several years ago some friends of mine in England were expecting their fourth child. The third-born, already five, was filled with expectation. Then the mother had a miscarriage. The father had to tell the little girl, as best he could. He managed it rather lamely; and ended up with a 'darling, it is better so'. It didn't satisfy the child: 'But, Daddy, is there anything better than a baby?' Could it be that here children have a value system closer to that of God?

Some Christians feel that they do not have enough love to care for more than two or three children. How much love do you have? On marrying the normal idea for a person in love is, I have no limit to my love. Wrong! But the calculated approach - I, we, have love enough for two or three children, no more, is even wronger! Well, let's qualify that. You are right that, by yourselves, you don't have enough love for 6 or 4 or 2 children. But, with God, you will have all the love necessary for those He has planned for you: 12 or 4 or just one!

Is your home a big home or a small one? I don't refer to the size of its rooms but to the size of the hearts beating and learning to beat in it. The world needs families where big hearts are formed; and those can only be formed by big-hearted parents.

Bringing children into an evil world?

Let me refer now to one objection which presents itself to many good people, and which I understand full well. "The thing is that I do not want to bring a child into a world like ours where there is so much evil, and where it seems so easy to go wrong and so hard to go right, to get to Heaven".

No! if life is better than death, God is stronger than the Devil, good attracts more than evil. Evil attracts? Of course! I imagine you saw that TV interview with Mel Gibson just before his "Passion" came out. After he had described his own life, which almost led him to suicide, he was asked why he had given the figure of Satan or Evil he introduced into his film a face not only strong but in some way attractive. His answer: because Evil attracts!... But the more of it you take into yourself, the emptier you become!

People are becoming empty today, hollow people; and the more they calculate the various ways of filling that emptiness - pleasure, possessions, comfort, power - the emptier and more unhappy they become. Behind all of this, apart from a lack of faith in God, there is a grave anthropological error. The mistake of trying to *calculate* your way to happiness. One of the most verifiable facts about calculation is that it never adds up to happiness. Happiness is just not gotten by calculation. Nor can it be bought (go into the nearest store: do you sell happiness

here? How much does it cost?). Happiness is the result of learning to love, and the key to love is to come out of self, to stop calculation and to put your hand and your life into God's hands. He will lead you to happiness, also through the Cross. There is no other way.

The particular artistic vocation of women

Now I would like to address more directly to women the creative artistic challenge I see in all of this. For, just as at the moment of the Incarnation, the redemption of human life today lies particularly with women.

Woman's special role is that she is more attuned to giving life than is man. And along with life, to giving love. Man has a special aptitude for what is technical; woman for what is personal and human. Why should women just want to compete with men in making the world more technical, and not feel the special call to re-humanize and re-personalize it?

The Gospel tells us that only by losing your life will you find it. The Second Vatican Council and John Paul II have made us familiar with the "personalist" way of expressing this paradoxical truth: we can only find or fulfil ourselves by the sincere gift of ourselves (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24). In his 1988 Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Pope relates this especially to women. At the conclusion of the letter, recalling the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman, "If only you knew the gift of God", he says: "The present reflections have sought to recognize, within the "gift of God", what he entrusts to women, to every woman. In the Spirit of Christ, women can in fact discover the entire meaning of their femininity and thus be disposed to making a "sincere gift of self" to others, thereby finding themselves" (31).

Perhaps woman has more need of self-giving; or perhaps she simply has more to give. In any case, the world desperately needs her self-giving. If she doesn't give it, humanity loses. And yet - would you agree with me? - women seem not so prepared as they were just a few decades ago to give themselves - in teaching, in nursing, and especially in motherhood. Worse still, they are more ready to yield to the temptation of looking down on these callings and regarding them as unfulfilling, whereas they are in fact especially fulfilling.

It is bad if men *don't care for humanity*. It is worse if women don't; if they give in to what some consider to be a traditional feminine temptation and start seeing this mission-role as something life has thrust on them, as a motive of self-pity rather than as a privileged mission of femininity. Ours is a world in need, of understanding, affection, care. Society is sick and in need of nursing; male nurses alone can never rise to the job. Society is homeless and lonely and in need of a mom; other considerations apart, "male moms" will just not do!

I can never forget the big impact of a little incident in my life. I once took four young nephews of mine on a visit to the Grand Canyon. As the electric bus took us silently and

awestricken along the rim of the Canyon, the silence was broken from the back of the bus by the sudden fury directed by a little child to its mother trying to calm it: "I - hate - you" (it was a deathly cry). You could almost feel a shudder run through the bus. It only lasted a second for it was dispelled by the mother's articulated and strong reply: "And - I - love - you". The bad spell was broken. It was as if the bus had been exorcised and turned into a home. The mother's affirmation was stronger, for love is more powerful than death and prevails over it. The culture of life has to be stronger, more vital than the culture of death.

"The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that *God entrusts the human being to her in a special way*. Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns women in a special way - precisely by reason of their femininity - and this in a particular way determines their vocation" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 30). Pro-life creativity is of course not just for women. Men have to give themselves too, to be true civilization-renewers as husbands and fathers. But they won't do that without the lead of women. To take the lead in re-humanizing a dehumanized humanity is woman's greatest role today.

The music of the family

The Pope's Letter to Artists has special words of praise for musicians, who enrich the world with the music of life, with that singing which naturally accompanies the gospel announcement of the Good News, as it did at the first Christmas. "In order to communicate the message entrusted to her by Christ, the Church needs art... The Church also needs musicians. How many sacred works have been composed through the centuries by people deeply imbued with the sense of the mystery! The faith of countless believers has been nourished by melodies flowing from the hearts of other believers..." (no. 12).

Perhaps the most important melody to be sung today is that of the family. Oh yes, the firm strong music of motherly and fatherly love gathering up the raucous response of children and turning it into a strong symphony of the sound of love. But, who can live with a child bawling? And yet our whole culture cannot live without rock and rap. How a mother's lullaby (even if she sings out of tune) sounds before the throne of God - better than the Hosannas of the angels.

Too many people today feel they belong nowhere, and, even worse, that they never had a place where they belonged. We all need a place where we belong, however little we deserve it. What woman does not want to have someone to whom it means something very special when she says "I'm here" (Mel Gibson's film also had a lesson in the greatness of that mutual consolation). Hence the power and merit and authority of the mother and father who are

dedicated to making a home, to being a home, and to being at home. What a pro-life witness this is!

This indeed is counter-cultural. The culture of life set powerfully over and against the culture of death. You Christian couples have to be a *mystery* to others, a puzzle, because you fly in the face of their superficial and unhappy values: - freer from material concerns; - treasuring each child as a work of art and a gift of God; - happier in family life; - richer in the vitality of family interaction. THAT is surprising; that is a witness to hope and to faith. That in the end convinces that life and love are more powerful than death.

NOTES

[1] I am thinking mainly here of the fine arts of painting, sculpture, poetry, music.

[2] Encyc. *Evangelium Vitae*. no. 97.

[3] *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, II, 2 (1979), p. 702.