

Errors of Modern Culture

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! ~ Isaiah 5:20

EVERY BOOKSTORE is filled with “self-help” books. The divorce courts are filled with people whose marriages “didn’t work out.” The “sexual revolution” has spread sexually-transmitted diseases like wildfire, has created two generations of children many of whom have never lived with two parents and may not even have known their fathers, and has resulted in the holocaust of a million abortions every year. The appetite for ever-greater consumption of material goods — “luxury” homes, “luxury” cars, “luxury” vacations — is exalted in the name of “you’re worth it.” Entertainment panders to the endless need for more titillation, shock, and gore.

In all of these and many more ways, something has gone very wrong with our modern culture. Just as importantly, a large number of people cannot even acknowledge its evils. Those who live outside subsistence economies experience a day-to-day physical comfort, convenience, good health, and luxury that is new in the world’s history, and the everyday opulence of our material existence is used to bury what our hearts and souls are telling us.

What happened? In brief, God has been rejected and humankind has become its own god. This is not a new idea; it can be found in pre-Christian Greek philosophy where one philosopher claimed: “Of all things the measure is man” (Protagoras, DK 80b1). This idea did not really take hold in ancient times, but it was given new birth beginning with the introduction of the medieval philosophy of “nominalism,” which argued that there was no such thing as abstract and universal concepts but only names

that designate a collection of things that seem alike but share nothing unchanging and universal. This belief suggests that there is no such thing as human nature, but only humans. What we think of as unchangeable is, according to this way of thinking, actually changeable. From here it is a very short trip to thinking that human nature is something created merely by the way we are raised, not something with which every human person is born. Conscience can then be eliminated in favor of a morality that people create for themselves.

Other strands that led to our modern mess include the dreadful effects of what was boastfully called by its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century practitioners the “Enlightenment.” We have all heard “I think, therefore I am” (René Descartes). Reason was enthroned and faith thrown away. However, things did not stay settled, for philosophers then began to argue that the only way to be sure about something was to experience it with the senses, that reason itself was not to

be trusted. The effect on the perception of morality was profound, for no one can see or hear good or evil as such. Both revealed law, given to us in Sacred Scripture, and natural law, discoverable by reason, were discredited. Thus morality was disconnected from objective truth and made into something purely subjective, internal to the individual person. The process of transforming morality from fact to feelings was completed with the rise of nineteenth-century romanticism.

At the same time, the conclusion that sense experience was the only certainty led to a form of ma-



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terialism that has been the glory of the scientific method and the death of belief in anything than can't be measured. In losing its moorings in philosophy, science also sought to reduce our understanding of everything only to how it is made and of what it is made. Questions about what something *is* (the essence or identity of it) have been ruled out by nominalism, and questions about the *purpose* of a thing (its end) cannot be asked or answered by materialism. We have all encountered materialism in arguments about the evolution of species. The materialist scientist sees everything as random and causeless, without design or purpose, "merely the interplay of matter that has always existed" (CCC 285).

As a consequence of the centuries of change in the way we think, our culture no longer accepts the fact of an objective moral reality. In our culture, morality is purely subjective, decided upon by each individual and not susceptible to criticism by anyone else. And morality is formed by a sense of what "feels good" and "feels bad," not by any understanding of the universality of the human experience or of human nature. Many people are attracted to the idea of societies that seem to live without rules and to the idea that children can be molded into newer, better versions of humanity, as if personal sin could be totally eliminated by social engineering. This erroneous view says that cultures should not be judged as good or bad, and behaviors should not be viewed as good or evil (except that judging is itself somehow always evil).

Those who have no solid basis for their "values" fall prey to one of the most devastating errors of our contemporary culture: the belief that the purpose of an action can alone make it good. In older terminology, this was called the belief that the "end justifies the means." All the evils of abortion and ma-



Pope St. Pius X, reigning from 1905 to 1914, sought to combat the rapidly spreading errors and excesses of the secular mindset

nipulation of the human embryo fall into this category of seeking to justify an evil act because of the good intentions in doing it. For a woman aborting a child, the purpose might be as lofty as prevention of the suffering of a damaged child to as trivial as prevention of losing a semester of education. The desire of a childless couple to be parents overrides any scruples about the ways the child is conceived and whether other embryos might die to gain one child. For the person suffering from a devastating disease, the desire to be cured sets aside any concern about killing tiny new humans to carry out research for the cure.

(And for those who might argue that a "ball of cells" will never experience suffering in being killed, why then would they not be equally willing to kill, say, an anesthetized infant for its valuable body parts?)

The goals we now set ourselves are much more limited than in the world where humanity knelt before God. Now we seek only to force nature to its knees, to gain complete knowledge and control of it, and to reshape it in ways of our own design; we have replaced God with ourselves. Yet by viewing the world entirely in materialistic terms and refusing to accept the reality of God, the world begins to lose romance and courage, integrity and principle, and truth; to forget its sense of sin, suffering, repentance, redemption, transcendence, and joy — both the good and the awful truths about being human and of all that is worthy of worship and awe in God. The cold scientific method and "values clarification," a form of cold calculation about moral choices, are instead the things that describe the world and the human condition.

And so people seek physical comfort and pleasure. The absence of life in God that could inspire

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them to “lift up our hearts” has made them insatiable. Not that they haven’t sought satisfaction; the “sexual revolution” has been about, more than anything, seeking a substitute for God in the most pleasurable sensation most humans experience. And since this need for satisfaction never ceases, the creation of a culture that sanctions sexual pleasure without any constraints at all was inevitable: “[A]lthough they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom 1:21-25). For some, even sexual pleasure is not enough and drugs that mimic it (Ecstasy and others that produce a “high”) are sought out. Those who suffer the consequences of sexual liberty are regarded as people who need to “get over” guilt, anguish, “unreasonable possessiveness,” “petty jealousy,” “unrealistic expectations,” and the like. And children are told that every arrangement for safeguarding their physical and emotional welfare and maturation is as good as every other. Those who believe in objective moral values are vilified: “*Bold*

and willful, they are not afraid to revile the glorious ones” (2 Pt 2:10).

Yet no amount of fantasizing about the non-existence of God and the infinite changeableness of human nature changes the hard reality described by the world-weary writer of Ecclesiastes: “*I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, man’s delight. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun”* (Eccl 2:4-11). Worldly pleasure does not ever fully satisfy the human heart, and unrestrained liberty is not freedom. “Having everything” is as nothing. St. Augustine, a former libertine who became a great saint, put his finger on the problem and the solution at the same time in his great

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Dedicated and vowed to the service of the poorest of the poor: five sisters of the Missionaries of Charity (MC), founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta in 1950



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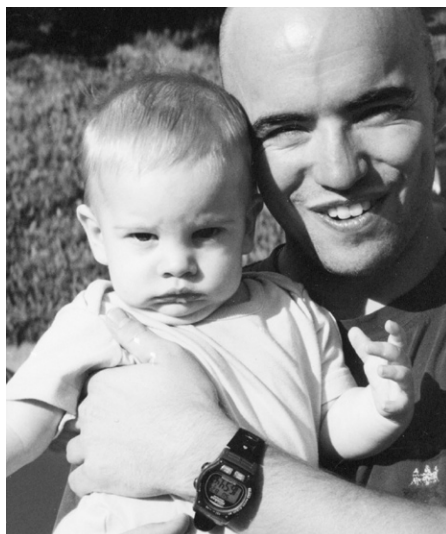
*“Contrary to what our modern culture tells us,
happiness is not in getting, but in giving.”*

cry to God: “our heart is restless until it rests in you”¹ (CCC 30). Without God, nothing satisfies for more than a brief time.

For us to break out of the mindset of the current culture, it is essential that all pretensions be abandoned. The idea that there can be nothing objectively true, and that we can know only what we experience with our five senses is to deny our experience of the unmeasurable, things like the love of parents for their children and the exaltation of music. And the idea that we cannot know good and evil when we do it, and see others doing it, is absurd in the face of our everyday experience of guilt, shame, admiration, and outrage.

Jesus told us two things about truth: first, that we can “*know the truth, and the truth will make [us] free*” (Jn 8:32), and second, that he himself is “*the way, and the truth, and the life*” (Jn 14:6). These are our anchors in a world without moorings. Once we begin listening to his teaching, and follow his example, and understand why he lived and died, we can truly seek and find happiness, the happiness of a heart resting in God. And because Jesus could not remain physically with us, he gave us his own creation, the “*church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth*” (1 Tm 3:15), which leads us to the foot of the cross for forgiveness and redemption, feeds us with the Bread of Life, and gives us “*sound teaching*” (2 Tm 4:3).

The constant teaching of the Church includes the following truths: 1) that humankind is created, not gods; 2) that human mastery over creation is, first and foremost, a mastery over a self wounded by sin; 3) that the created world is good and is ours to be used to bring us closer to God; 4) that truth itself is knowable; 5) that we can know that God exists and that he is good by human reason alone; 6) that we can know good and evil by human reason although not with great reliability due to our darkened intellect and weakened will; 7) that faith in God is not opposed to reason but transcends and completes what we can know without God’s Revelation; and 8) that the entire truth about our human condition is revealed in the mystery of Jesus, the Word made flesh, who



“fully reveals humanity to itself and brings to light its very high calling” for since “human beings are the only creatures on earth that God has wanted for their own sake, they can fully discover their true selves only in sincere self-giving” (Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* 22, 24). Contrary to what our modern culture tells us, happiness is not in *getting*, but in *giving*, following the example of Jesus, who gave himself up entirely for love of us.

Unlike the agnostic, the Christian knows that he is not a product of blind chance but can know why he exists, that he was created, by God, for the purpose of being with him, to “*become partakers of the divine nature*” (2 Pt 1:4). We ourselves, therefore, must strive for holiness — to become holy as God is holy (see Lv 11:45; see also Mt 5:48). St. Paul calls us to “[p]ut off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:22-24). In so doing, he continues, “*let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another*” (Eph 4:25). By this means, the Christian will “*convince some, who doubt; save some, by snatching them out of the fire*” (Jude vv 22-23). It is in this solicitude for our neighbors that not only is the world sanctified, but those whose love leads them to “*seek and to save the lost*” (Lk 19:10) save themselves as well, for “*if any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, . . . whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins*” (Jas 5:19-20). God gave us the command to go out into a hostile, unbelieving, unknowing world. He gave us the truth and told us to spread it to the entire world (see Mt 28:19-20). We are to evangelize, not be blinded by the world. We are not to be part of the world but to be in it and to lead it — back to reality and back to God.

(CCC 36, 50, 88, 154, 226, 285-286, 299, 355-356, 359, 377, 1753-1756, 1776, 1889, 1954-1955, 1960, 2124, 2467)

¹ St. Augustine, *Confessions* 1, 1, 1 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina* 32, 659-661 (Paris: 1841-1855)