

Pope St. John Paul II, the Second Vatican Council, and the Crisis of Modernity

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What is the “crisis of modernity?” In order to explore this topic from the perspective of the Second Vatican Council, I shall focus on *Gaudium et Spes*, which has the subtitle *De Ecclesia in Mundo Huius Temporis*, commonly translated into English as “Concerning the Church in the modern world.” If we take our cue from *Gaudium et Spes*, then we would say that the crisis of modernity is a “crisis of the human being” or of the “human person.” The pastoral constitution identifies the “human person” as the key to its whole discussion, the “hinge” (*cardo*) of its exposition, that very human person (*hominis persona*) who is to be “saved” and whose society is to be “renewed” (*instauranda*).¹ More specifically, the 1965 pastoral constitution calls us to discern the “signs of the times” in this “modern world” which is a “new age in history” (*mundi hodierni; in nova historiae [...] aetate*).² It argues that one of the principal signs of these modern times is a “spiritual turbulence” or “uneasiness” (*hodierna animorum commotio*),³ which stems from a growing technical ability to achieve practical mastery over the natural world and a disproportionate lack of moral and theoretical apparatus to make sure that the human being is able to control the forces unleashed by our growing technical mastery rather than being, paradoxically, enslaved to them. The modern world displays itself as one that is “at once powerful and weak, capable of doing what is noble and what is base, disposed to freedom and slavery, progress and decline, amity and hatred.”⁴ As *Gaudium et Spes* 9 underlines, there is, on the one hand “a growing conviction that the human being is able and has the duty to strengthen its mastery over nature” and that the benefits of this mastery should be widely available, and, on the other hand, that the awareness these benefits are actually available only to the few and that many are unjustly deprived of them, and that this is an affront to “the dignity proper to individuals and to societies.” The passage continues emphasizing that aware of these conflicting tendencies, modern “man questions himself” (*Unde [homo] seipsum interrogat*); these are age-old questions but with a modern inflection:

¹ Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 3 (Vatican City, 7 December 1965). The English translation is my own. The Latin text is available online at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_lt.html.

² *Ibid.*, para. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, para. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 9.

In the face of modern developments (*coram hodierna mundi evolutione*), there is a growing body of people who are asking the most fundamental of all questions or are glimpsing them with a keener insight: What is man (*homo*)? What is the meaning of suffering, evil, death, which have not been eliminated by all this progress? What is the purpose of these achievements, purchased at so high a price? What can people contribute to society? What can they expect from it? What happens after this earthly life is ended?⁵

In the same paragraph, the Council gives the Church's fundamental answer to these questions which is able to "illuminate the mystery of man" (*ad mysterium hominis illustrandum*): "The church believes that the key, the center and the purpose of the whole of human history is to be found in its Lord and Master [...] Christ, who is the same yesterday, and today, and forever" (cf. Heb 13:8). After this introduction, which lays out the basic problem and approach to addressing it, the first chapter of *Gaudium et Spes* specifies the Church's answer more fully and this time, in paragraph 12, focusing on the question of the human being and human dignity: "Enlightened by divine revelation, the Church can offer a solution to [these problems] by which the true state of man may be described, his weakness explained in such a way that at the same time his dignity and vocation may be perceived in their true light." The dignity and vocation of human beings comes from their creation in the image of God and possession of an immortal soul,⁶ and are thereby called to communion with God.⁷ This dignity is, however, obscured by sin and the proper freedom attaching to it has been diminished by sin, which hampers human beings in fulfilling their vocation to communion with God and with each other.⁸ When people "look into their own hearts they find that they are drawn towards what is wrong and are sunk in many evils which cannot have come from their good creator."

Notwithstanding atheism seems to exalt man, who is thereby seen to "constitute his own end and as his own sole maker, in total control of his own history," encouraged in this view by the technical mastery of nature made possible by modern science,⁹ it detracts, in fact, from human dignity, which is impaired by loss of hope in eternal life and which is not diminished by the acknowledgement of the Creator but rather is "grounded and brought to perfection in God."¹⁰ The Church "knows full well that its message is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart, since she champions the dignity of the human being's calling, giving hope once more to those who already despair of their higher destiny."¹¹ The

⁵ Ibid., para. 10.

⁶ Ibid., para. 14.

⁷ Ibid., para. 19.

⁸ Ibid., para. 13.

⁹ Ibid., para. 20.

¹⁰ Ibid., para. 21.

¹¹ Ibid.

Church's answer is more fully revealed in paragraph 22: "In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man (*mysterium hominis*) truly becomes clear." It is in Christ "the new Adam" that we see the fullness of human being and dignity, for He "in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of His love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his high calling" (*Christus, novissimus Adam, in ipsa revelatione mysterii Patris Eiusque amoris, hominem ipsi homini plene manifestat eique altissimam eius vocationem patefacit*). Because He is the Son of the eternal Father who united to Himself human nature and thus each and every one of us, because now each one of us can say, with Paul, "the Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me" (cf. Gal 2:20), human dignity has been elevated "to a dignity beyond compare." It could be said that, in its elevation, human dignity is fully clarified and, to use an Irenaean word, "recapitulated"; it is "summed up" in the last Adam, the new Adam and new head of the human race. Those conformed to His image are able to fulfill the "new law of love," that is, they are enabled to act more and more with the dignity proper to humanity and, more and more, to fulfill the human vocation of communion with God and others, in that very love which was revealed in the Paschal mystery. "Such is the nature and the greatness of the mystery of man as enlightened for the faithful by the Christian revelation," and this includes "the mystery of suffering and death which, apart from His Gospel, overwhelms us."¹²

The light shed by Christ on the mystery of human being is also thereby shed on the social aspects of human life, "for the Word made flesh willed to take his place in human society", and in so doing "he sanctified those human ties, above all family ties, which are the basis of social structures."¹³ The communion of the Church is invoked here as *Lumen Gentium* 9 describes it: a reflection and accomplishment of God's creative will. God "did not create people to live as individuals but to come together in social unity," and therefore, as *Lumen Gentium* argues, "he willed to [...] save human beings not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather to make them into a people."¹⁴ The social character of human nature is "perfected and fulfilled in the work of Jesus Christ, who, by His incarnation willed to take his place in human society," and to sanctify its ordinary interpersonal bonds such as those of the family. The Church, one could say, recapitulates and fully reveals God's intentions for the communal character of human life, not because the Church is without corruption or has a perfect governmental structure, but because it is established by "the gift of [Christ's] Spirit [...] a new fraternal communion among all who received him in faith and love, his own Body, the Church."¹⁵ Christ's Spirit

¹² Ibid., para. 22.

¹³ Ibid., para. 32.

¹⁴ Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, para. 9 (Vatican City, 21 November 1964). The English translation is my own. The Latin text is available online at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_lt.html.

¹⁵ Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 32.

binding the Church into communion or solidarity recapitulates the solidarity that is part of God's intentions for human creatures in the first place, and therefore provides perspective on all other claims to solidarity. From the perspective of this recapitulation, the solidarity already glimpsed in various forms of human community as an aspiration can be recognized as something which must be nurtured: "This solidarity must be constantly increased until that day when it will be brought to fulfillment."¹⁶

Until the eschatological fulfillment of human solidarity is accomplished, the Church provides an anticipatory vision of human community and social life, and this is found in the principles of what is usually called "Catholic social teaching". The Council draws attention to features of Catholic social teaching especially relevant to the problems of the modern world, namely, the increasing global interdependence of peoples and thus an expanded sense of the common good,¹⁷ the essential equality of all human beings,¹⁸ the need to transcend a morality that is narrowly individualistic and included as an element in all of these principles,¹⁹ and respect for the dignity of the human person.²⁰ There is in the modern world "a growing awareness of the sublime dignity of human persons, who stand above all things and whose rights and duties are universal and inviolable."²¹

1. Recapitulation and Dialogue

It is from this perspective of the recapitulation of man, of *homo*, of the human being in Christ, that the Church wishes to engage in dialogue with the modern world. Although it is a commonplace to note that the Council wanted to foster dialogue between the Church and the "world of today," or as we have been talking about it, the "modern world," it is less commonly acknowledged that each of the four Chapters that constitute Part 1 of the document ends on different aspects of the way in which Christ has recapitulated human being and human history in Himself, and is therefore the starting point for any contribution the Church can make to dialogue. This dynamic is not confined to paragraph 22; it is, in fact, explicitly named in the closing section (paragraph 38) of Chapter 3: "The Word of God, through whom all things were made, became human and dwelt among us, a perfect human being, he entered world history, taking that history into himself and recapitulating it." It is actually in Chapter 4 that this recapitulatory dynamic and its connection to dialogue rises to a kind of crescendo; paragraph 40 observes that: "All we

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., para. 25–6.

¹⁸ Ibid., para. 29.

¹⁹ Ibid., para. 30.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., para. 26.

have said up to now about the dignity of the human person, the community of human beings, and the deep significance of human activity provides a basis for discussing the relationship between the Church and the world and the dialogue between them.” The perspective is drawn from *Lumen Gentium* and is frankly Augustinian, with overt reference to the dynamic of the two cities, the way that members of the earthly city are called forth to form “the family of the sons of God in the midst of history,” and the way the two cities are intermixed or “penetrate one another.” The Church is at once ““a visible organization and a spiritual community”” – could we say, the sacrament of the Heavenly City?²² “In pursuing its own salvific purpose not only does the Church communicate divine life to man (*homine*) but in a certain sense it casts the reflected light of that divine life over all the earth, notably in the way it heals and elevates the dignity of the human person, strengthens the social bond, and endows daily activity with a deeper meaning.”²³ It can only cast this light of divine life because that life is its constitution in the Spirit, so that the Church, as a visible society constituted by a communion in a “life” it did not and could not give itself, is the presence of this life in the city of this world. The Church elevates the dignity of the human person (and so forth) not simply by its teaching or by the example of some of its members but by its very presence within the world.²⁴ It provides perspective on the unmitigated claims of the earthly city on the human being insofar as it elevates human beings into a communion, “proceed[ing] from the love of the eternal Father,”²⁵ that relativizes all worldly claims to defining the ideal community and serves as the “soul of human society *in its renewal by Christ*.”²⁶ The recapitulatory dynamic means that, ironically, simply by being Church and by teaching from its identity as such, the Church, “through each of her members and her community as a whole [...] can help to make the human family and its history *still more human*.”²⁷ Chapter 4 is very emphatic on this point; the text goes on to mention that: “The Church is entrusted with the task of manifesting to [contemporaries] the mystery of God, who is their final destiny; in doing so it discloses to them the meaning of their own existence, the innermost truth about themselves.”²⁸ This is the solution to the crisis of modernity, namely, dialogue with the world on the basis of the mystery of the recapitulation of human being in Christ, both individually and communally. “To follow Christ the perfect human is to become more human oneself.”²⁹ This dynamic of dialogue based in recapitulation is magnificently recalled in the closing section of the very same Chapter:

²² Ibid., para. 40 (citing *Lumen Gentium* 8).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., para. 41.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., (citing *Lumen Gentium* 38) (emphasis mine).

²⁷ Ibid., (emphasis mine).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., (emphasis mine).

Every benefit the people of God can confer on humanity during its earthly pilgrimage is rooted in the Church's being 'the universal sacrament of salvation' (*Lumen Gentium* 7), at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of God's love for humanity. The Word of God, through whom all things were made, was made flesh, so that as a perfect man he could save all human beings and *sum up (recapitulare) all things in Himself*.³⁰

Thus to engage in dialogue from the heart of the Gospel is, ironically, to engage in dialogue from the heart of the human being, and in such a manner as to address the crisis of modernity concerning the status of the human being in terms that have an echo in every human heart regardless of their faith.

2. Pope St. John Paul II and *Evangelium Vitae*

In this section, I examine the work of Pope St. John Paul II to demonstrate his use and development of this paradigm for dialogue. To this end, I would like to give some extended consideration to one of his greatest encyclical letters, namely the 1995 *Evangelium Vitae*, which deals with one of the most contentious issues of the modern world: abortion (and related concerns). This letter operates in the tension between a doctrine that is accessible to reason, as part of the natural law and that as something that could be discussed in civil society without appealing to religion, and yet one that can only be articulated with full force and clarity from the perspective of revelation. Yet the conviction that speaking from revelation is also speaking from the heart of humanity at its best undergirds the confidence with which John Paul II regards the possibility of believers animating a conversation and renewing social life drawing on the terms of revelation, without at the same time insisting on imposing these terms as the only acceptable ones in which the issue can be discussed even in a secular society.

The recapitulatory dynamic, of which we have laid out the terms in *Gaudium et Spes*, is quite prominent in *Evangelium Vitae* where, for instance, one reads: "In Jesus, the 'Word of life,' God's eternal life is [...] proclaimed and given. Thanks to this proclamation and gift, our physical and spiritual life, also in its earthly phase, acquires its full value and meaning [...] In this way, the *Gospel of life* includes everything that human experience and reason tell us about the value of human life, accepting it, purifying it, exalting it and bringing it to fulfillment."³¹ Again, a little earlier the text states: "The Gospel of life is

³⁰ Ibid., para. 45 (emphasis mine).

³¹ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, para. 30 (emphasis original, see the Latin text) (Vatican City, 25 March 1995). The English version is available online at: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html. Latin text at:

something concrete and personal, for it consists in the proclamation of *the very person of Jesus,*” through whom human beings are “given the possibility of ‘knowing’ *the complete truth* concerning the value of human life.”³²

It can be shocking reading in the same section that, nonetheless, “it (i.e., the Gospel of life) can also be known in its essential traits by human reason,” since this might seem to make revelation superfluous. Nevertheless, this is neither a zero sum nor a competition between revelation and reason as it fits into the recapitulatory dynamic we have seen in *Gaudium et Spes*; although the essentials of the doctrine are part of natural law and can at least in theory be known by reason alone, the mystery of the person of Christ includes everything reason can know and further uplifts, fulfills, and purifies it: “This is the Gospel which already present in the Revelation of the Old Testament, and indeed written in the heart of every man and woman, has echoed in every conscience ‘from the beginning.’”³³ To preach the Gospel of Life strictly speaking means at the same time to evoke its “echo” in the human heart where it is to some extent already present in reason alone. It is to recapitulate that echo, which does not mean to erase it or drown it out, but to uplift it precisely as the locus or plane of dialogue with modern secular man.

This very dynamic is even more evident in paragraph 2 of *Evangelium Vitae*. God reveals the supernatural vocation of the human being to a “fullness of life” which extends into eternity. Yet the Church knows “that this *Gospel of life*, which she has received from her Lord, has a profound and pervasive echo in the heart of every person – believer and non-believer alike – because it marvelously fulfills all the heart’s expectations while infinitely surpassing them.”³⁴ Everyone sincerely open to truth and goodness, the Pope says, can “come to recognize in the natural law written in the human heart (cf. Rom 2:14–15) the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end, and can affirm the right of every human being to have this primary good respected to the highest degree.”³⁵ Recognition of this right is, in fact, the foundation of human and political community. Believers are even more aware of this right because it is recapitulated in the proclamation of the incarnation. Recalling and actually citing *Gaudium et Spes* 22, John Paul II notes: “‘By his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every human being.’ This saving event reveals to humanity not only the boundless love of God who ‘so loved the world that he gave his only Son’ (John 3:16), but also the *incomparable value of every human person.*”³⁶ Again, far from the erasure of what reason can see in the natural law, in

http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/la/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.

³² Ibid., para. 29 (emphasis original, see the Latin text).

³³ Ibid. (emphasis original).

³⁴ Ibid., para. 2 (emphasis original).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. (emphasis original).

contemplating the mystery of the Redemption the Church is able to invest this universal starting point with a new sense of “wonder.”

Yet there is a crisis, which is the same one acknowledged by *Gaudium et Spes*; paragraph 11 of *Evangelium Vitae* underlines that: “In the background there is the profound crisis of culture, which generates skepticism in relation to the very foundations of knowledge and ethics, and which makes it increasingly difficult to grasp clearly the meaning of what man is [...]” This is an echo of *Gaudium et Spes* focusing on the crisis of the meaning and value of the human being. We also see the exact same crimes against life and human dignity—such as abortion, torture, slavery, the selling of women and children, disgraceful working conditions, and so forth—pointed out in *Gaudium et Spes* 27 repeated and cited in *Evangelium Vitae* 3. According to *Gaudium et Spes*, these crimes “poison human society,” and the Church can proclaim this because the revelation in Christ of the sublime dignity of the human person, injured and clouded by sin but restored and elevated as recapitulated in Christ, can explain modern man to himself, how these poisons can arise even though there is a “natural knowledge” available regarding the dignity of the human person and the sacredness of life, and how “conscience itself, darkened as it were by [...] widespread conditioning, is finding it increasingly difficult to distinguish between good and evil in what concerns the basic value of human life.”³⁷

In a situation where, as paragraph 28 of *Evangelium Vitae* illustrates, the crisis of modernity has become “an enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the ‘culture of death’ and the ‘culture of life,’” it is the revelation of man to himself in Christ that clarifies the situation. It is the blood of Christ, specifically, that reveals man to himself. Poured out on account of sin, and so revealing the depth of human depravity, it also “reveals the grandeur of the Father’s love, *shows how precious man is in God’s eyes and how priceless the value of his life.*”³⁸ It is in contemplating the precious blood of Christ, “the sign of his self-giving love (cf. John 13:1),” that “the believer learns to recognize and appreciate the almost divine dignity of every human being.”³⁹ Christ’s blood is, the text continues, truly the key to the riddle of human being, modern or otherwise: “Christ’s blood reveals to man that his greatness and therefore his vocation, consists in the *sincere gift of self.*” This is a direct echo and development of *Gaudium et Spes* 24, which elucidates how the revelation of the Trinity through the Incarnate Word’s teaching “has opened up new horizons closed to human reasoning by indicating that there is a certain similarity between the union existing among the divine persons and the union of God’s children in truth and love. It follows that [...] human beings [...] can fully discover their true selves only in sincere self-giving.”

³⁷ Ibid., para. 4.

³⁸ Ibid., para. 25 (emphasis original); cf. para. 49 and 86.

³⁹ Ibid.

3. The Sources of Dialogue and renewal

Although it seems an irony, the fact that the recapitulation of human being and solidarity in Christ grounds the conviction of human dignity more firmly in Christian faith, which might seem to narrow the possibilities for dialogue with an unbelieving world, following the pattern laid out in *Gaudium et Spes* it actually increases those possibilities. This is precisely because revelation is recapitulatory: it does not erase the primordial common ground that human reason can see on its own, but strengthens it, clarifies it, purifies it, and uplifts it. It does not take away the common territory, as it were, in which dialogue in a secular or modern culture can take place, but increases the possibilities for dialogue in just that space. Christian conviction does not shut down dialogue with a “my way or the highway” insistence on the acceptance of revelation as the only acceptable terms of discussion; as John Paul II says, it is “capable of bringing about a serious and courageous cultural dialogue among all parties” towards the end of a “*general mobilization of consciences and a united ethical effort.*”⁴⁰ How does this work? Revelation enables us to see more deeply into the sacredness of human life, something that all people have and have had access to “from the beginning” (*Evangelium Vitae* 40). Contemplating the offer of sharing the life of God eternally which we receive in Christ, “believers cannot fail to be filled with ever new wonder and unbounded gratitude” (*Evangelium Vitae* 38), and the recapitulatory effect means that this wonder and gratitude draws into its orbit the natural life which is the seed of the eternal life won in Christ’s victory. “Precisely by contemplating the precious blood of Christ, the sign of his self-giving love (cf. John 13:1), the believer learns to recognize and appreciate the almost divine dignity of every human being and can exclaim with ever renewed wonder: ‘How precious must man be in the eyes of the Creator, if he ‘gained so great a Redeemer!’”⁴¹ The believer is filled with “awe and wonder” at the genesis of life in procreation (see *Evangelium Vitae* 44), which extend even to the whole natural world (see *Evangelium Vitae* 42), our “common home” as Pope Francis has recently put it, in which our bodily human life takes its place. Our meditation on the Pierced One draws forth “praise and thanksgiving” for the sacrifice of Christ and thereby the humanity that He took up – *our* humanity – is drawn within the orbit of this thanksgiving. At the outset of the encyclical, we read: “The Church, *faithfully contemplating the mystery of the Redemption, acknowledges the incomparable value of every human person with ever new wonder.*”⁴²

The renewed appreciation of the dignity of the human person as recapitulated in Revelation also casts light, and helps to define, the characteristic offense of that dignity prevalent in modern culture. It is one

⁴⁰ Ibid., para. 95 (emphasis original).

⁴¹ Ibid., para. 25 (citing the *Exsultet*).

⁴² Ibid., para. 2 (first emphasis added, second is original).

that “denies solidarity,” the very solidarity we have seen uplifted in *Gaudium et Spes*, and in many cases this denial “takes the form of a veritable ‘culture of death.’”⁴³ Although this is a rather dramatic way of putting it, we can analyze the essential features of this culture of death; it is, the encyclical says in paragraph 12, “actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency,” which turns out to be one excessively concerned with power, one that therefore victimizes the weak, the vulnerable, and those who lack autonomy. This in turn attacks the basis of democracy and democratic freedom, since freedom is degraded to an individualism, the “freedom of ‘the strong’ against the weak who have no choice but to submit.”⁴⁴ Paragraph 18 elucidates that this is a threat “jeopardizing the very meaning of democratic coexistence” and dissolving its solidarity because it becomes a benefit extended only to the powerful.

Another way of characterizing the culture of death is that it prioritizes *having over being*, which echoes *Gaudium et Spes* 35: “People are of greater value for what they are than for what they have,” which in turn goes hand in hand with prioritizing *efficiency over persons*: “The values of *being* are replaced by those of *having* [...] The so-called ‘quality of life’ is interpreted primarily or exclusively as economic efficiency [...].”⁴⁵ Or, even more forcefully, in the same passage one finds: “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.’ This is the supremacy of the strong over the weak.” This includes, especially, and “above all,” the “poor”, as specified in the preceding section. There is provided here the basis for cultural renewal through dialogue because the cultivation of wonder and gratitude for human life, correlated with the philosophically articulated values prioritizing being over having and person over efficiency, can be engaged without overt reference to revelation, even if revelation is the source of the believer’s ever new wonder and gratitude and of his or her clearer seeing of the priority of being over having and person over efficiency. In the last chapter, calling for cultural renewal and dialogue, in paragraph 98 the encyclical observes: “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 the person over things*.”⁴⁶ Note that this is demanded “from everyone,” and it is assumed that “everyone” regardless of faith can understand the values named here – these values are written in the human heart, however obscured by sin and by cultures formed in sinful practices. There is nothing in them that depends

⁴³ Ibid., para. 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid., para. 19; cf. para. 20.

⁴⁵ Ibid., para. 23 (emphasis original).

⁴⁶ Ibid., para. 98 (citing *Gaudium et Spes* 35) (emphasis original).

on accepting revelation. A modern, pluralistic secular culture can understand wonder and gratitude, even if the culture on its own is not enough to sustain it (the question must arise, gratitude to whom?) but requires the “leaven” of the Church, the sacrament of the city of God, to diagnose the problem, and to illuminate and activate a persuasive dialogue about these values in order to awaken consciences.

We find Pope Francis calling for the same thing some thirty years later in *Laudato Si'*. A democratic society has the ability and resources to engage in thinking about its own foundations in respect for persons, even if the ultimate grounding for it is not fully available to reason alone, and yet the terms can be understood, and what is at stake can be grasped, while the democratic values and practices of wonder and gratitude, of preferring being over having and persons over efficiency, can be taken up in partnership with believers. It will be possible for believers to participate in this way precisely because they are not relying only on the resources of reason alone, but on the renewal and recapitulation of human being accomplished in Christ. From there flows a clear-sighted diagnosis of the problem and, even more importantly, a ready flowing gratitude and wonder which is ready, precisely out of gratitude, to be conformed to the self-giving love of Christ and to undertake the kinds of sacrifices that will be necessary to inspire a dialogue that is more than words. In Jesus, the law, available to reason but which on its own can seem to dwindle to an obligation imposed externally and to invite limitation and mitigation (see *Evangelium Vitae* 48), “becomes once and for all the ‘gospel,’ the good news of God’s lordship over the world,” and through the figure of the Servant of the Lord, fulfilled in Jesus, we are given “a ‘new heart,’” which “will make it possible to appreciate and achieve the deepest and most authentic meaning of life: namely, that of being *a gift which is fully realized in the giving of self.*”⁴⁷

More emphatically, paragraph 25 underlines that the contemplation of the Precious Blood of Christ prompts us to grateful wonder, also because it reveals to man in a recapitulatory way that “his greatness, and therefore his vocation, consists in *the sincere gift of self*” – it is precisely from the blood of Christ “that all draw *the strength to commit themselves to promoting life.*” There is no cultural renewal without sacrificial witness, but this is part of the priestly, prophetic and royal vocation of the baptized. Promoting a culture of dialogue means encouraging among believers a culture of self-giving sacrifice, and not necessarily in big ways but in “all those daily gestures of openness, sacrifice and unselfish care which countless people lovingly make in families, hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly and other centers or communities which defend life.”⁴⁸ There is no cultural renewal on the cheap, and no dialogue on the cheap. Yet out of a truly self-giving witness, which is consistent and thick in its many manifestations and venues, engagement in a dialogue about the democratic values of being over having and persons over

⁴⁷ Ibid., para. 49 (emphasis original).

⁴⁸ Ibid., para. 27.

efficiency can emerge and touch consciences, and has the potential of renewing democracy itself in the awe and wonder at the gift of human life and the dignity of the human person.

4. *Veritatis Splendor*

It is worth mentioning that this recapitulatory dynamic, and its power to engender witness that can serve as a wellspring for dialogue which operates within terms accessible to reason alone, is rather movingly present in the 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, which begins in paragraph 2 with a citation of *Gaudium et Spes* 22 (and we have seen that the recapitulatory dynamic is by no means confined to that one section). After its introduction, we find it operative throughout *Veritatis Splendor*; when the discussion turns to martyrdom, we are confronted with a particularly sublime version of this dynamic. Christ's witness to the truth that human freedom is lived most deeply in the "gift of self, *even to the total gift of self*, like that of Jesus" is the "source, model and means for the witness of the disciples,"⁴⁹ which from the earliest times until today has borne fruit in martyrdom. Christ's martyrdom, and the martyrdom of His disciples who, in a way, make Christ's martyrdom present, cast light on the natural law that is part and parcel of human nature and accessible to reason alone. The relationship between faith and morality, John Paul II says, "shines forth with all its brilliance in the *unconditional respect due to the insistent demands of the personal dignity of every man*." In the same paragraph (paragraph 90), the author underlines that "the universality and the immutability of the moral norm make manifest and at the same time serve to protect the personal dignity and inviolability of man [...]." He then argues that the "unacceptability" of ethical theories that deny the existence of negative moral norms that are universally binding is "confirmed in a particularly eloquent way by Christian martyrdom, which has always accompanied and continues to accompany the life of the Church today."⁵⁰

We recognize what we have been calling the recapitulatory uplifting and purification of that which is most human, that which all human beings share, including here the natural law itself. Perhaps an unexpected result is that Christ's martyrdom and Christian martyrdom formed in its pattern shine a light on the heroism of others who are not Christian and who come from various traditions and cultures. John Paul II continues: "In this witness to the absoluteness of the moral good *Christians are not alone*: they are

⁴⁹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, para. 89 (emphasis original) (Vatican City, 6 August 1993). The English version is available online at: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, para. 90.

supported by the moral sense present in peoples and by the great religious and sapiential traditions of East and West, from which the interior workings of God's Spirit are not absent."⁵¹ The recapitulatory character of this recognition of the heroism of non-Christians is absolutely clear here: "In an individual's words and above all in the sacrifice of his life for a moral value, the Church sees a single testimony to that truth which, already present in creation, shines forth in its fullness on the face of Christ." John Paul II invokes Justin Martyr's characterization of the hatred and destruction some of the Stoics faced for their teaching.

The heroic witness to the moral law by persons of different religions and cultures offers a way for dialogue to take place about that law, dialogue which helps to reveal its meaning and its appeal to those without the benefit of Christ's revelation—in other words, to a secular modern world. It can take the form of dialogue precisely about this heroism. Most interestingly, the natural law itself is revealed, in this way, as offering a theorization of intercultural and inter-religious admiration. Surely that is a wonderful path for communication and dialogue in the modern world, a world which seems so closed off to something seemingly narrow and intransigent as the "universally binding character of the negative precepts of the moral law!" All of a sudden dialogue means leveraging the admiration for human heroism that we do all feel. It is not so hidden in the human heart and it occurs, we know, even across the boundaries of cultures that are sometimes portrayed in a *post*-modern world as incommensurable barriers to human understanding. In this light, John Paul II appears as a faithful and brilliantly creative interpreter of the dialogical imperative of the Second Vatican Council and its grounding in the "light of the nations" that is Christ and that shines on the Church as the seed of the new humanity, and from there on the whole world.⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid., para. 94 (emphasis original).

⁵² Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, para. 1.