

KEEPING GOOD COMPANY

The Leavening Influence of Morally Ordered Lives

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This paper constitutes a minority report, but not at all in the sense of positioning itself in opposition to the laudable central concerns of this conference, with which its author is in enthusiastic agreement. Rather it is a minority report in the sense that it takes special cognizance of the caveat implicit in Cardinal Christoph Schönborn's observation that: "There are whole pastoral programs, with game plans and models of action and guidelines, that do not mention the name of Christ even once."¹ Cardinal Schönborn's reproach was made with greater specificity by Hans Urs von Balthasar in something he wrote just a few years after the last Council: "The Church since the Council has to a large extent put off her mystical characteristics; she has become a Church of permanent conversations, organizations, advisory commissions, congresses, synods, commissions, academies, parties, pressure groups, functions, structures and restructurings, sociological experiments, statistics..."²

The experienced and faithful organizers of this conference run less risk of falling under von Balthasar's censure than I do of falling under Cardinal Schönborn's, for my own offering makes hardly an explicit reference to Christ. It does seem appropriate, however, to complement the unquestioned value and priority of our conferences' technical, scientific, socio-economic and moral analyses with a few that hearken, as this one does, to last Council's reminder as to the indispensable role of personal holiness and moral integrity in the Christian mission to the world.

The Enlightenment attempt to perpetuate under rational or utilitarian auspices the moral acuties born of Christian conversion, while setting aside as expendable the religious formation of moral actors and the eschatological horizon that gives their actions weight and ultimate consequence, has failed. At the heart of the Christian moral revolution is an Event which, sacramentally mediated, has the effect of converting the heart into a moral gyroscope, thereby endowing the person with a degree of social autonomy and ethical perspicacity without which moral codes and engraved principles fail for lack of a living instantiation. As necessary as codified laws and less formally promulgated operating procedures are, their success will largely depend on the presence among those they regulate of men and women in whose hearts is inscribed the ethical orientation which the law can at best pre-scribe and approximate. (Jeremiah 31:33-34)

Codes rushed into place in an effort to make up for the decline in the moral ambience of a given corporate or business culture exist to make up for the unreliability of the moral actors involved. There is nothing wrong with this makeshift. It is quite inevitable, but it must be recognized for what it is. Like a stimulant used to maintain alertness in someone wearied by lack of sleep, this expedient can become a substitute for that which it seeks to be an expedient, further depleting resources it is incapable of restoring. Codes can substitute for, and eventually replace, the virtues

¹ Christoph Schönborn, *Loving the Church*, trans. John Saward, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 100-101.

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 109-110.

they attempt to codify. The task of reviving the virtues underlying these codes cannot be fully accomplished by appeals to virtue, however, for virtues are not self-legitimizing or self-authenticating. They arise from, and depend on, a vision of moral order and personal responsibility which is unavoidably religious in nature, and necessarily embedded in an overarching vision of life's meaning and purpose. If the virtues commensurate with such a vision are to be effective in the practical order, they will need to be *inculcated* and not just pedagogically admonished, intellectually justified, and morally sanctioned.

The Church's contribution to greater justice and equity in the political and economic arenas of life should begin with what the Church does best and what political and corporate institutions are powerless to do: namely, to expand by way of sacramental and catechetical *formation* the ethical horizon of men and women who work in the secular world. As necessary as it is to restructure institutions or broaden political and economic calculations with an eye to a more just and equitable impact on the world, no moral pedagogy, however scrupulous, can replicate the effect of the religious/ethical *formation* of the moral actor himself or contribute as much over time to the ethical *esprit de corps* of the particular institutions within which he or she works.

Today, Pelagian optimism is on the wane, but vestiges of it survive in the hope that conversionless moral progress might be brought about by alternations in political, social, or economic structures. Culture matters, as do its moral codes, but few societies can afford the constabulary force required to keep order, much less raise the moral level of the society, in the absence of the kind of ethical interiority that Christian conversion is capable of inspiring. The West's historical over-familiarity with Christianity has lulled it into underestimating how much the culture's moral fabric and the social harmony it facilitates depend on the leavening influence of a resident Christianity. This is true as well for those subsidiary cultural institutions engaged in commerce, education, and the maintenance of the social infrastructure.

In an interview Pope Benedict gave to a panel of German journalists on August 5, 2006 in the papal summer residence of Castel Gandolfo, the Holy Father said:

I believe that the real problem of our historical moment lies in the imbalance between the incredibly fast growth of our technical power and that of our moral capacity, which has not grown in proportion. That's why the formation of the human person is the true recipe, the key to it all, I would say, and this is what the Church proposes.

Moral interiority, though a by-product of conversion that is Christianity's principle concern, has long provided the moral infrastructure of societies under Christian influence. As the cultural marginalization of Christianity proceeds apace, this task falls to secular institutions which are both considerably less equipped for it and, perhaps for that reason, largely inattentive to it. To try to make up in legislative codes or general principles the moral rigor that is receding with the progressive marginalization of Christianity is to put the Pauline principle that sin takes advantage of the law to the sort of test it has never failed. Nor is it likely to fail when the organizational structures being retrofitted with loftier aspirations are economic ones which have been traditionally and, some argue, inherently ordered toward more morally modest material goals. As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrines of the Church* puts it: "The economy, in fact, whether on a scientific or practical level, has not been entrusted with the purpose of fulfilling man and of

bringing about proper human coexistence. Its task, rather, is partial: the production, distribution and consumption of material goods and services.”

Much of the discussion of corporate responsibility presupposes the operation of some form of enlightened self-interest, and the idea does indeed have economic validity and practical applicability in the business environment. But the *form* which is the template for Christianity’s sacramental and catechetical *formation* is the cross, not the rising tide that lifts all boats. One needn’t gainsay the market’s moral bedrock – that the common good can be served by the pursuit of private ends – to recognize that such a supposition is impotent to inspire the principled selflessness and expanded sense of solidarity which the *Compendium* repeatedly invokes. The loss of the Paschal core of Catholic moral vision is part and parcel of a loss of the Christological core of Catholic anthropology. Jesus, says the Catechism, is “Israel’s Messiah and therefore the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, was to fulfill the Law by keeping it in its all embracing detail – according to his own words, down to “the least of these commandments.”³ If the managerial concern of the burgeoning field of corporate social responsibility is the promulgation of a business ethos and codes of conduct conforming to it, the Christian’s concern is the transformation from within of the corporate culture by awakening in those working within it a more edifying sense of purpose and the deeper and more sustainable sense of personal gratification that accompanies it.

In, *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict XVI offered an overview of the Catholic contribution to a just social order. Inasmuch as the relationship between the Church and the State implicit in his comments is analogous to the relationship between the Church and the Market, Pope Benedict’s observations are pertinent to the theme of “The Good Company” conference. “Building a just social and civil order,” writes Benedict, is “a political task,” and, as such, it “cannot be the Church’s immediate responsibility.” The Church’s task in this regard is rather the “*ethical formation*” of the lay professionals working in the secular institutions. Acknowledging that “the formation of just structures is not directly the duty of the Church,” Benedict nevertheless insisted that the Church bears responsibility for “the reawakening of those moral forces without which just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run.” The *Compendium* of the Church’s Social Teachings should be thoroughly studied in Catholic colleges and universities, along with the Catechism, as a tool in the *formation* of a Catholic sensibility and a Christian conscience. To use the *Compendium* as the codification of ethical standards and an enumeration of the principles of a just order, without at the same time attending to the formation of those who will be expected to uphold these principles, is to betray the promise the *Compendium* holds.

The foregoing amounts to little more than Christian commonsense, and there may be little reason to provide it with more substantial forms of corroboration. There is, however, abundant evidence highlighting the wider social and cultural ramifications of individual example, and its superiority over more code-based attempts to raise the level of social interaction and render a society more caring and just. Foremost among them, perhaps, is the work of René Girard in explicating the power and influence of what he calls mimetic desire, the desire awakened by the exhibited desire of another, whether it be a desire for personal gain or for moral rectitude. Girard’s mimetic

³ § 578

anthropology throws considerable light on the power of mimetic influence – for good or ill – in human affairs. If one bad apple spoils the bunch – a proverbial, if unsophisticated, recognition of what Girard calls mimetic desire – so one person of principle catechetically formed to see his or her professional responsibilities in the context of a larger and loftier set of moral obligations can influence both colleagues and the organizational culture in which they collaborate in subtle but important ways. The mimetic power of such witnesses is both less coercive and more likely to lead to interior and lasting change in others than is the adoption of external procedures and codes of conduct, however essential it may be to put such codes and procedures in place.

Just as water runs downhill, so the negative consequences of mimetic desire abound. To desire what another has or aspires to have is to find oneself in rivalry with the one who served as a model for the desire. Much of Girard's work and that of his interpreters has to do with the many perils associated with mimetic desire of this sort. But there are, as Girard readily acknowledges, good and healthy forms of mimetic desire, and we more or less recognize these when we speak of the need for good role models and mentors. Girard's analysis, however, goes considerably beyond these commonsensical understandings of influence, and when seen through the anthropological lens he provides, the uniqueness of the Christian vocation itself comes more fully into focus. For, while our world acknowledges the need for mimetic models when, for example, it laments the paucity of good role models, it tends to privilege autonomy and the independence from mimetic influence that autonomy typically implies.

The New Testament, on the other hand, is suffused with mimetic allusions. We are incessantly bidden to “follow Christ,” just as Christ acknowledges that he himself only does what he sees the Father doing; that he does not come in his own name, and so on. The very identification with Christ on the part of the Christian involves something far more profound than the use of Christ as a visual aid for living a respectable or virtuous life. Rather it leads to the kind of identification to which Paul refers when he says: “I live, now no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

More than a century before René Girard provided anthropological corroboration, John Henry Newman recognized the subtle but potent power of mimesis, going so far as to credit it with the astonishing and otherwise inexplicable spread of Christianity in the ancient world. The cultural structures of that ancient world were hardly more congenial to Christian penetration than are the corporate structures of today's global market, and what Girard and Newman, from their respective disciplines, have to say about the power of personal influence applies to the latter no less than the former.

Whether it be Christ himself or his disciple, writes Newman, “it is not a mere set of opinions that he has to promulgate, which may lodge on the surface of the mind; but he is to be an instrument in changing (as Scripture speaks) the heart ...” What Newman says of the Christian truth generally is true of the moral imperatives that derive from it. It is propagated, he writes, “not by books, not by argument, nor by temporal power,” but by *personal influence*. It is all but impossible, he insists, “to estimate the moral power which a single individual, trained to practise what he teaches, may acquire in his own circle, in the course of years.”

So preaching or proclaiming or codifying the truth, however necessary, unavoidable and admirable these things are, is ancillary to the primary task of exemplification. We will be able to

share the rational and moral fruits of our faith, argues Benedict XVI, “only if we live our own inheritance vigorously and purely. This will make its inherent power of persuasion visible and effective in society as a whole.”⁴ The personal influence of someone who aspires to “live the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) may scandalize the rebellious – *non serviam* – spirit, but it does so only because of its inherent irresistibility. (Wisdom 2)

Speaking in what we would today see as a Balthasarian tone, Newman lauded “the natural beauty and majesty of virtue, which is more or less felt by all but the most abandoned.” “Men persuade themselves,” he says, “with little difficulty, to scoff at principles, to ridicule books, to make sport of the names of good men; but they cannot bear their presence: it is holiness embodied in personal form, which they cannot steadily confront and bear down...”

“One little deed, done against natural inclination for God’s sake, though in itself of a conceding or passive character, to brook an insult, to face a danger, or to resign an advantage, has in it a power outbalancing all the dust and chaff of mere profession,” Newman declares. The spiritual bedrock of the Second Vatican Council is its universal call to holiness. Underlying that call is the realization that holiness is at least the principal, and arguably the sole, method of Christianizing the world and civilizing and morally improving its custodians and institutions.

Nor should the mimetic effect of an exemplary model be underestimated or thought to have only imperceptible effects. “The attraction, exerted by unconscious holiness,” writes Newman, “is of an urgent and irresistible nature; it persuades the weak, the timid, the wavering, and the inquiring; it draws forth the affection and loyalty of all who are in a measure like-minded; and over the thoughtless or perverse multitude it exercises a sovereign compulsory sway, bidding them fear and keep silence ...”

When we say that a person or a situation is “dramatically” altered, we tend simply to mean that the alteration in question has been a significant one. We might allow the adverb to carry more of its etymological and metaphorical weight, however, for dramatic changes often come about as moral actors come to see their acts as embedded in a grander and nobler drama, into which they draw others by the integrity with which they make tangible the conjunction of freedom and obedience to which the world is habitually blind but to which their mission and their moral lives testify. Catechetical formation situates one’s life in the drama of salvation history, what von Balthasar calls the *theo-drama*, the backdrop against which a Christian can discover his or her mission, identity, and freedom. Whatever ancillary benefits it might confer, the Church’s primary contribution to a more equitable and just economic order is to *in-form* the faithful engaged in business and commerce of their role as Christians in the *theo-drama* of which von Balthasar has written so eloquently.

Once the underlying religious vision has become sufficiently attenuated, ethical codes are simply the moral fashion of the moment, and adherence to their strictures easily becomes at best perfunctory and at worst cynical. In addition to whatever code of ethics might be promulgated and enforced, if it is to be more than a constraint whose limits and loopholes are to be quickly

⁴ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 115.

explored, it must be situated within a cultural context which includes what the social philosopher Lee Harris has called a visceral code, that is, the set of moral presuppositions and the inherently religious horizon in which they are necessarily embedded. The West, as Harris assessed it, has undergone a “collective metastasis at the primary level of the visceral code,” the effect of which is incalculable. After such a moral transformation, Harris writes, “men and women not only think and argue differently; they feel and respond differently. They are now ashamed of what once made them proud and proud of what once shamed them.” When situated against this sort of massive moral and cultural shift, there is scant prospect of rectifying the situation by relying primarily on juridical codes for which there is no predisposition in the visceral code.

Harris recognizes what Girard has so extensively explored and explicated, namely the role of mimesis in both cultural life and the life of each person. Harris uses Aristotle’s term *telos* to refer to a culture’s ostensible “goal” of human fulfillment. If the goal the culture holds up as worthy of the aspiration of its participants is to fulfill its role, it must exist “in the form of an actual individual who has fulfilled this ambition in an exemplary way.”

Though there is nothing in Harris’ analysis to indicate any familiarity with Girard, von Balthasar or Newman, his diagnosis brings him to a similar conclusion. Harris argues for the importance of “shining examples,” exemplars of virtue and rectitude who function as living witnesses for those with whom they come into contact. “To follow in the footsteps of a living person is a radically different process from attempting to conform one’s day-to-day life according to an abstract principle or maxim,” Harris writes. A world devoid of shining examples or a world so crowded with glittering but fundamentally vacuous ones, Harris argues, is a spiritual wasteland.

In a world where shining examples are no longer pointed out, what is there to aspire to? You must change yourself, as Rilke’s poem tells us, but into what? A tolerant person? A wise person? These are abstractions. They permit us to declare ourselves “tolerant” without further ado, just as we can equally well declare ourselves “caring” or “loving” or “open-minded”.... Indeed, we can even display bumper stickers that assure both us and the world of our deep devotion to world peace and the brotherhood of man.

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Corresponding, *mutatis mutandis*, to the excesses of scholasticism in centuries past, this over accommodation to the sociology of worldly organization and the attendant loss of sacramental sensibilities and ecclesial self-confidence has made the Church more irrelevant even as she seems to have satisfied more and more of the worldly demands for relevance. The Church’s increased familiarity with worldly operating principles has contributed to a blurring of the distinction between the activity of the Church *as Church* and her role as moral pedagogue to her sons and daughters living in worldly situations and working in secular institutions.

The market being the roughly democratic economic institution that corresponds to the roughly democratic political institutions of Western cultures, and insights into the role of the Church vis-

à-vis the state bear on the related problem of the Church's role with regard to the market. The Church's task is to bear witness to "the moral truth." In order to do so, wrote then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "This truth must be vigorous within the Church, and it must form men, for only then it will have the power to convince others and to be a force working like a leaven for all of society."

In addition to trying to encourage economic institutions to be more just and equitable – the important concern with which this conference is rightly and admirably concerned – the Church needs to attend more thoughtfully to the old-fashion business of religious formation with an eye to its moral repercussions in social life, including the life of contemporary business institutions.

"What we most need at this moment in history are men who make God visible in this world through their enlightened and lived faith," wrote then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. "God returns among men only through men who are touched by God." My allusions above to eschatological, ethical and religious horizons are gathered together and brought to bear on the concerns of this conference is something that pope Benedict has written:

If globalization in technology and economy is not accompanied by a new openness to an awareness of the God to whom we will all render an account, then it will end in catastrophe. This is the great responsibility imposed on us Christians today.

This statement is so sweeping that it is difficult to read it without automatically and unconsciously toning it down. In fact, however, two things are being clearly juxtaposed: a recognition of the fact that we will all one day have to account for our lives before God, on one hand, and the unleashing of technological and economic power that will end in catastrophe, on the other. "No reduction of Christianity to something merely spiritual or to ethics is enough to arouse people," Fr. Julián Carrón of Communion and Liberation. "That is exactly why we need men who witness to this fullness for the whole of life. We need witnesses."