

Preface

This issue of *Logos*, unlike the previous two, is not a thematic one (readers will recall that Issue 1 treated the importance of the imagination for faith and culture and that Issue 2 focused on the thought of John Paul II). Rather, it offers sundry pieces and introduces a feature that will recur every several issues—“Disputed Questions,” a symposium that examines a question from different perspectives. Nonetheless, the contents divide roughly into four parts. The first two articles treat important social concerns: Catholicism and multiculturalism and the ethical integrity of the professions. The next two offer commentary on the works of two prominent Catholic authors: Flannery O’Connor and Walker Percy. The “Disputed Questions” section follows these with three reflections on Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”?* Finally, the issue is rounded off with a review-essay of Charles Morris’s study of the development of American Catholicism. Drawing as they do from such diverse disciplines as sociology, history, literary criticism, theology, philosophy, and education, these articles reflect the interdisciplinary approach that *Logos* seeks to promote.

Two Important Social Concerns

James L. Heft’s “Catholic Multiculturalism: An Oxymoron?” is exactly the kind of article I was hoping would someday be submitted to the journal. Reading the debates about multiculturalism in the popular press and in other journals, I was troubled by the acrimony and the recourse to straw figures, caricature, and sometimes willfull misunderstanding. So, it was a pleasure to read Heft’s temperate reflections.

He does not consider Catholicism and multiculturalism to be mutually exclusive, but, in fact, believes that Catholic universities “bear a special responsibility to foster multiculturalism.” This responsibility stems from the undeniable fact of America’s growing diversity, from the role of universities as “places of civil and enlightened debate,” and from three characteristics of the Catholic tradition. Heft argues that an engagement with multiculturalism is appropriate because Catholicism 1) “affirms an expansive and positive doctrine of creation,” 2) “affirms the importance of both faith and reason in coming to understand all that we are called to understand,” and 3) “affirms, along with the Jewish and other traditions, the dignity of every person.”

Finally, drawing upon the insight of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Heft points out that a concern for multiculturalism does not yield a thorough-going relativism. Catholic universities can both respect Ratzinger’s critique of relativism and respond to John Paul II’s powerful call to respect diversity in his address to the United Nations in October 1995.

What does it mean when “medicine” becomes “the health care industry” and the “university” becomes “the education industry?” Those who see the difference and are concerned about it will find Robert Bellah’s trenchant analysis of the state of the professions sobering indeed. The dignity of the professions derives from the focus on “sacred things” (justice, health, truth) and from the “capacity to articulate and put in

practice transcendent ethical standards for the good society.”

But of late, the ethical autonomy of the professions has come under attack. In many places, the greatest threat to the professions comes from the state, but in American society, it comes from the market. More and more, for example, patients, students, and legal clients are seen as customers, and doctors, professors, and lawyers, as service providers. Nor is the oldest profession of divinity exempt from this subversion. As Bellah notes with chilling precision, when an Episcopal bishop defines himself as the CEO of the diocese, the clergy as employees, and the laity as customers, “a more complete denial of the body of Christ would be hard to imagine.” The ill effects of this adoption of the market outlook are most tellingly present in university life in the creation of a large academic underclass, who for meager salaries and no long-term security teach the balk of undergraduates, and of a small overclass who are acquiring ever larger perquisites.

Bellah concludes with the question of whether business executives are professionals? His answer is a resounding “yes,” for “the economy, like everything else on earth, belongs ultimately to God” and “the businessperson is God’s steward, with the obligation to make the economy serve everyone.”

According to Bellah, “the most prosperous elite in human history stands at the brink of a precipice.” One wonders what will happen if that elite goes over the precipice. Will the jettisoning of transcendent ethical standards mean that our openness to transcendence itself will be affected? Will it result in what Walker Percy calls, “the loss of the creature?” Will it mean a reduction in human sovereignty? Is Bellah’s analysis an indication that our culture is in the grips of what Percy calls “the thanatos syndrome?” One wonders about the exact implication of Bellah’s statement: “Anything like a 50 percent drop in the average wage over an extended period of time would place an enormous pressure on all our institutions.”

Two Southern Catholic Writers

Flannery O’Connor and Walker Percy are generally considered the most prominent and accomplished Catholic writers of the last half of the twentieth century. But, for some readers, they are also quite puzzling. Not only do they share a Southern heritage and a formal interest in what it means to be a “Catholic” writer, they also held a common conviction that contemporary culture is largely deaf to the Christian message—that for a vast number it is a worn-out old song, a rubbed-down penny. The consensus that a Chaucer or Milton shared with their audiences is no longer available, and so both believed that special measures were needed.

Hence both resorted to the grotesque, the sordid, and the violent in order to reclaim the religious imagination. How does the Christian novelist, “having cast his lot with a discredited Christendom and having inherited a defunct vocabulary,” proceed, asks Walker Percy.

He does the only thing he can do. Like Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, he calls on every ounce of cunning, craft, and guile he can muster from the darker regions of his soul. The fictional use of violence, shock, comedy, insult, the bizarre, are the everyday tools of his

trade. How could it be otherwise? How can one possibly write of baptism as an event of immense significance when baptism is already accepted but accepted by and large as a minor tribal rite of somewhat secondary importance to taking the kids to see Santa at the department store? Flannery O'Connor conveyed baptism through its exaggeration, in one novel as a violent death by drowning. In answer to a question about why she created such bizarre characters, she replied that for the near-blind you have to draw very large, simple caricatures.¹

That reliance on shock is plainly evident in the title of the short story that Marcia Smith Marzec analyzes in her article. Any reader who is particularly troubled by the title should see Marzec's long, explanatory footnote 15, where she lucidly lays out the critical history of the issue. A mini-essay in itself, the footnote reports O'Connor's awareness that the statue is "a terrible symbol of what the South has done to itself."

Marzec's reading of O'Connor's favorite story carefully attends to its details and to its psychology as well as its theology. Too often readers of O'Connor reach too quickly for the theological implication and miss how solidly grounded her stories are in human psychology. She astutely sees young Nelson's statement that he was born in Atlanta, not as a boast—as so many critics have—but as a claim, a necessary moment in his developing identity. The claim also has an important theological implication, one that stands in contrast to Mr. Head, who in Pelagian pride sees the city as evil and other. Nelson acknowledges his place in the evil city; he accepts, in other words, the condition of original sin and the need for salvation. Mr. Head, on the other hand, has to learn of his sinfulness and of the error of his belief "that man is saved by the righteous avoidance of sin."

Marzec writes that "it is clear from the description of the statue that it is meant to be a figure of Christ crucified." At its feet, Mr. Head "realizes that the suffering of the black race, the suffering of poor Nelson, and his own suffering now share in the redemptive suffering of the crucified Christ." The very thing that Mr. Head had scorned in his pride becomes an instrument of his salvation.

In a sense, Roberta Maguire's article tracks Percy through his second to his third career. Percy began his career as a scientist. Educated in chemistry at the University of North Carolina and trained as a physician at Columbia, he set upon a career in medicine, but while performing autopsies at Bellevue he contracted tuberculosis. During his convalescence in upstate New York, he began to read existentialist philosophers and novelists and, shortly thereafter, to write philosophical essays on the problems of symbol and meaning. He never returned to medicine, and the influence of his reading and writing altered his once strongly-held belief in the purity of the scientific method. He converted to Catholicism and lived a quiet life in Covington, outside New Orleans, writing essays and novels.

Maguire examines why Maritain's naming of the symbol as "the keystone of intellectual life" was taken up by Percy in his essays of the 1950s and how Maritain's diagnosis of Bergson gets embodied in Binx Bolling, the hero of *The Moviegoer*, Percy's first novel and the winner of the National Book Award. Binx longs "to escape Bergsonian duration"

and to “recognize an immaterial yet substantial presence of something else in things.” Through a series of experiences—joining Kate, his future wife, in her car and seeing a man emerge from a church on Ash Wednesday—Binx sees that “‘through some dim, dazzling trick or grace’ God is in alio esse.”

Disputed Questions: Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”?

The first topic to be taken up in the “Disputed Questions” section is an intriguingly bold and surprisingly (given the initially harsh reaction to his thesis) popular volume of three essays on the issue of universal salvation, the possibility that all human beings will be saved. And we offer three perspectives: an overview of von Balthasar’s approach to the issue, a consideration of the Trinitarian basis of his views, and, finally, an investigation of the methodological questions involved. All three writers address the scriptural problem inherent in the issue—the status of scriptural passages that speak of perdition in the face of other passages that speak of God’s desire that all be saved—and all note the difficulty of finding a resolution and of the danger of subsuming either set of passages.

While at once recognizing the difficulty of the issue and exhibiting a certain sympathy for his view, Nicholas J. Healy traces von Balthasar’s route to universalism from his encounter with Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor to his work on Karl Barth and, finally and probably most influentially, to his association with Adrienne von Speyr, who on Good Friday from 1941 until her death in 1967 mystically experienced Christ’s abandonment. Healy notes at the end of his piece how in the Church’s liturgy and its Christology von Balthasar discerned a command to unlimited hope.

While acknowledging the constraints on Catholic eschatology “by the Church’s magisterial condemnation of every theory” that entails a subsumption of either the perdition or the universalist scriptural texts, Margaret Turek attempts to understand von Balthasar’s position in the context of his deeply-held Trinitarian theology. Turek carefully analyzes the relationship of the Father and the Son and examines its implications for human freedom, hope, and salvation. So intricate is the argument that it is not possible to do justice to it here, just as Turek recognizes that her brief analysis must set aside many complicated, even troubling, aspects of von Balthasar’s position in order to pursue its Trinitarian basis with clarity. Ultimately, von Balthasar founds his hope on “the all-powerful powerlessness of the triune God,” and he speculates “whether the judgment of each human being entails entering into the mystery of Holy Saturday in such a way that ‘the sinner, who wants to be ‘damned’ apart from God finds God again in his loneliness, but God in the absolute weakness of love who unfathomably in the period of nontime enters into solidarity with those damning themselves.’”

Richard Schenk takes the discussion in a somewhat different direction from the previous two, focusing on the methodological problems raised by von Balthasar’s position. Specifically, he addresses the problem of methodological indirectness, the implications for the antinomic structure of limited knowledge (in other words, the paradoxicalness of so many Christian formulations), the relationship between the scriptural record and its

theological extrapolations, and, lastly, the limitations of arguments from “convenience.” In the course of his analysis, Schenk compares von Balthasar to others who have addressed the question of universal salvation, most especially Karl Rahner. He reports the challenges of gnosticism and Neo-Chalcedonianism that Rahner leveled against von Balthasar, and he suggests that Rahner’s working through of the issue presents fewer methodological problems than does von Balthasar’s.

Meticulously nuanced, Schenk’s article traces connections between von Balthasar’s position and those of Nietzsche and Leibniz. What his masterly analysis suggests is how the very question of universal salvation itself cannot be separated from (bracketed from) the whole edifice of theological knowledge and methodology.

A Review-Essay

Robert Wellisch closes the issue with an examination of Charles Morris’s history of American Catholicism. In a work as sweeping as this, it is hard (probably impossible), as Wellisch says, “to avoid making mistakes.” And Wellisch provides a fair representation of some of these; in so doing, he implicitly reminds us of the caution we need always to bring to books of this sort. He also wonders whether the Irish domination of the American church and the American domination of the Catholic world are as total as Morris claims. On the “turmoils” of the present day, Wellisch concludes, “The institution that survived the potato famine and some of the silliness of the ‘good old days’ can certainly, guided by the Holy Spirit, survive the strains of the present.”

An “American Issue”

I opened by noting how this issue differs from the previous two. And while it does not have a formal theme, with two articles on “American” problems, two analyses of American writers, and a consideration of the rise of American Catholicism, we could dub it the “American Issue.”

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Editor

Notes

1 Walker Percy, “Notes for a Novel about the End of the World,” *Message in a Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1980), 118.