

Preface

WE ARE CREATURES OF THE MIDDLE. The rich implications of this truth are explored in grand terms in the famous “Oration on the Dignity of Man” by Pico della Mirandola, where the human person is portrayed as “the intermediary between creatures,” a being of “indeterminate image” whom God set “in the middle of the world” to participate in freedom in both what is above and what is below. Pascal in his own account of this topic helps us guard against the danger of arrogance in claiming our middle position but he also fends off despair: contemplating the infinite magnitude of the universe, Pascal wants us to feel “lost in this remote corner of nature”; but contemplating the approach to nothingness in the infinitely small, we are to recognize that the human body is “a world, or rather a whole,” so that finally the human person in nature is “A Nothing in comparison with the Infinite, an All in comparison with Nothing.” Pascal examines myriad aspects of this truth of the middle: the human person is merely a feeble reed, and yet a thinking reed; we are neither angels nor brutes.

Many fruitful insights into the richness of human culture emerge from this recognition of our middle position in space and time. We could say that human culture occupies a middle territory even in the ontological order, since the products of human culture are neither real in the same manner as objects of nature (although a cultural product such as a sculpture depends on the stone from which it is

carved) nor purely ideal because our cultural works always carry marks of their historicity. Tolkien captures our position as makers of culture in the middle realm with striking precision in his little work, “Mythopoeia,” when he uses the term “sub-creator” to describe our cultural activity in a middle state in which we are “Dis-graced” but “not dethroned.” Our works of culture are subordinate to and dependent on our state as creatures ourselves and yet “We make still by the law in which we’re made.”

It was an observation made by author Michael Torre in an essay in this issue of *Logos* that initiated this line of reflection as I considered the articles collected in the pages that follow. In his study of the depiction of evil in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Torre captures well the relationship between the imaginary world envisioned by Tolkien and the everyday world of Tolkien’s readers, claiming that the world of “Middle Earth” in Tolkien depicts “our time, the time of the Church” as Tolkien in his portrayal of evil shows the “various ways the Enemy must be fought, now, in our middle time of Middle Earth.” The heightened sensitivity in Tolkien to the significance of the middle position of human life provides a clue to understanding the importance he saw in the world of the imagination:

Blessed are the men of Noah’s race that build
 their little arks, though frail and poorly filled,
 and steer through winds contrary towards a wrath,
 a rumour of a harbour guessed by faith. (“Mythopoeia” 88)

Defying Freud’s attempt to reduce the products of imagination to “wish fulfillment,” Tolkien boldly affirms the act of wish fulfillment in the work of the imagination, but then elevates such wishes to the level of Christian hope: “Whence came the wish, and whence the power to dream, / or some things fair and others ugly deem?”

Could it be that a key to understanding our human responsiveness to the world can be found in this conception of our middle position? Approaching this issue from a different perspective, philosopher Helmuth Plessner in *Laughing and Crying* finds that these

two distinctive modes of human expression are grounded in the “eccentric” character of the human position in the world, a position determined by the necessity both to experience one’s body as the center of perception but also to surrender the absolute claim of such a center in dual acknowledgment of nature’s indifference to me as center and my inclusion in a broader order of relations beyond myself as center. We are caught in the middle, aware of ourselves in a middle position, and sometimes thrown off balance unexpectedly within our complex middle position so that laughter and tears as human responses bring such a position to spontaneous expression. Tolkien again in “Mythopoeia” captures in simpler terms the vibrant nature of human responsiveness as a function of our middle position: we “walk upon the ground / with nerves that tingle touched by light and sound.” We are open in our middle position to a wide range of peculiar perceptual phenomena, and “these each are duly registered and print / the brain’s contortions with a separate dint.”

No wonder, then, that literature can hold such importance for us, exhibiting as it does the nature of our position within the created order of things through the work of the artist as “sub-creator.” In this issue of *Logos* in addition to Torre’s study of Tolkien’s great work we also find reflections on the contemporary world of fantasy in the works of J. K. Rowling and an introduction to the literary world emerging from the works of contemporary Catholic writer Tim Gautreaux. Autobiography is another important literary genre within which the middle position of human life is explored, and we include in this issue reflections on the search for transcendence (that bridge for which we yearn from our middle position) in the autobiographical writings of Anne Lamott and Kathleen Norris.

It is not the work of artists alone that is illuminated by this conception of our middle position; the nature of work itself as a component of human culture acquires fresh significance for us when regarded from this perspective. I have already referred to Tolkien’s term “sub-creator” describing the work of the artist and we can pass

easily from this concept to a similar concept sometimes used in Catholic social thought to describe workers of all sorts as “co-creators” called by God to supplement the created order through work. In this issue we offer the reflections of Jean Bethke Elshtain on the meaning of work especially as seen in the writings of Pope John Paul II and of George E. Schultze, S.J., on work and worship.

Yet another important cultural component of life in the middle is the family, that institution mediating between the individual (and especially the child) and the broader culture as a whole, that institution today more than ever caught in the middle between the powerful claims and demands of the consumerist culture and the formative power of religious teachings as encouraged by and often mediated through the family. This issue offers two reflections on different aspects of family life: an article on the nature of sexuality within marriage and natural family planning and an article exploring the foundations of a family-based spirituality.

One final link in this loose thematic chain concerning the middle position of human culture: Christianity itself, as seen in the theological reflections of Edward Krasevac, O.P., in this issue, must mediate a position between time and eternity, between history and faith. The great Christological issues concerning the simultaneous humanity and divinity of Christ belong quite clearly to this topic of the “middle position” of human nature in need of and open to redemption through Christ. If we look back to the reflections of Pascal mentioned in the opening paragraph of this preface, we can see all the more clearly from this perspective why Pascal drew upon deep reflections on the middle position of human nature as part of his great apology for Christianity in response to the emerging modern worldview he discerned that would assert the ascendancy of human power.

Jean Bethke Elshtain in “**Work and Its Meanings**” brings to the foreground the anthropological reflections of Pope John Paul II as a necessary context within which the meanings of human work must

be understood. Elshtain demonstrates that various deficiencies in some contemporary concepts of the human person have impoverished the understanding of work in the “econometric and materialist” doctrines that dominate much contemporary social thought, and she shows how Catholic social teachings especially as developed in the encyclicals of John Paul II restore a proper understanding of human dignity to the concept of work. The human person has become subject to “commodification” in the contemporary world, Elshtain argues, especially as a result of theories of radical constructivism according to which the human person is self-constructed. John Paul II restores a proper understanding of human dignity through “[h]is emphasis on the human person as the subject of work, his focus on the relationship between work and human dignity, and his ‘personalist’ argument” showing that one can work for the common good even while actualizing one’s own nature as a human person, according to Elshtain’s penetrating analysis.

In **“Work, Worship, *Laborem Exercens*, and the United States Today,”** George E. Schultze, S.J., shows that as the Holy Spirit operates in our work lives, toil is an “inevitable” part of work. After a brief discussion of *Laborem Exercens* and a description of work life in the United States, the author then describes the challenges of a therapeutic culture and the tests of postmodern thinking when reading *Laborem Exercens* today. The work of philosopher Charles Taylor on the modern identity and theologian Kenan Osborne, O.F.M., on the sacraments provide material for reflection on the connection between work and worship in a postmodern time. The author then describes some linkages between work and worship in the area of faith-based community organizing and in the development of cooperatives in faith communities. The author contends that worship has a role in the transformation of work life and that the use of “solidarity” and the sense of permanence in *Laborem Exercens* make sacrifice and commitment important to this transformation.

The Harry Potter novels written by J. K. Rowling have been a notable contemporary cultural phenomenon and there has been

some discussion in various religious circles concerning the world-view presented in these novels. **Catherine Jack Deavel** and **David Paul Deavel** in “**Character, Choice, and Harry Potter**,” building their case on the basis of a comprehensive reading of the novels, argue persuasively that the view of human character presented by the novels is “strongly consonant with what Paul VI called a ‘civilization of love’ and what John Paul II has called a culture of life.” The novels focus above all on deliberation and choice as the key component of character and illuminate the beauty of sacrificial parental love. Moreover, in these novels “the moral worth of a choice depends upon the moral worth of what is chosen,” the authors argue. In detailed responses to a number of critics of the books, Deavel and Deavel demonstrate that the books support a number of Christian principles even though Christianity is not itself invoked.

Renewed attention to *The Lord of the Rings*, a text already avidly read in many parts of the world, has resulted from the film versions now available. **Michael Torre** asks why this book is both compelling and great, and in “**The Portrait of Evil in *The Lord of the Rings*: Reflections Personal, Literary, and Theological**,” he argues that it is the truthfulness of the depiction of evil in the work that marks its greatest strength. Torre claims provocatively that Tolkien’s depiction of evil is more compelling even than that offered by Dante, and he suggests that “[i]t is an artistic feat of the first order to make us sense the reality of spiritual evil as our greatest, and in the end our only, true threat.”

What resources might we draw upon in the effort to develop a family-based spirituality? **John S. Grabowski** in “**Called to Holiness: Spirituality for Families in Light of *Ecclesia in America***” confronts what he calls “the enormous problem of the dearth of distinctive models of spirituality for families within the tradition” and brings forward the rich resources for such a spirituality offered by the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America*. Renewing our understanding of the biblical concept of covenant proves to be a rich resource. Drawing upon a vision of the family as “a domestic

church that participates in the threefold office of Christ as Priest, Prophet, and King,” provides an additional conceptual spiritual foundation. Finally, understanding the family as a “sanctuary of love and life” shows us why “the family is crucial to the Church’s mission in proclaiming the gospel of life—the good news about the preciousness of the human person created in the image of God and redeemed by the blood of Christ.”

Retrieving our understanding of the intimate link between truth and freedom is crucial to a proper understanding of human sexual activity, according to **Christopher J. Thompson** in **“Choosing Sex: Freedom, Deliberation, and Natural Family Planning.”** Drawing upon the psychology of the human person developed by St. Thomas Aquinas, Thompson highlights the “dynamism of desire” at the heart of all creatures and then brings into focus the crucial element of deliberation as an essential component of the distinctively human striving toward fulfillment in the midst of such desire. This renewed understanding of human deliberation and desire provides a fresh account of what the word “natural” in the term “natural family planning” must mean: “natural family planning is correctly identified as ‘natural’ precisely because of its inherent capacity to invite couples to order their marital relationship in a manner that is consistent with the excellence of their created human nature.”

Christianity is a historical religion; that is, when in the words of the creed we affirm that Christ “suffered under Pontius Pilate,” we are using a traditional way of designating a particular historical period to acknowledge the historical reality of the life of Jesus Christ. **Edward Krasevac, O.P.**, addresses some of the issues that emerge concerning the relation between Christian faith and history in **“Between the Scylla and Charybdis of Faith and Fact: A Theological Reflection on the Relation of Christian Faith to Gospel History.”** After noting the extreme positions that have been taken on either side of the faith-history question, Fr. Krasevac asks, “[g]ranted our belief that God did indeed enter into human history and really did act there for our salvation, how *much* did God do, and

what things in particular? And further, which acts of God related in the Bible or taught by the Church (at least in some form) are really *essential* for us to believe, upon which ones does Christian faith stand or fall?" We are hindered by ambiguities in the question of faith and history, according to the author. The scientific and historical consciousness we absorb as modern men and women poses particular challenges in our effort to understand these issues; moreover, "we are affected in our interpretation of the nature of God's revelation by our own cultural and personal histories and prejudices." Such ambiguities should make us cautious when addressing these issues, but they do not cancel the fundamental link between history and faith at the heart of Christianity: "[t]he bottom line, it seems to this author, is our assent in faith that something really *happened* in the person and history of Jesus, something from the side of God that is not reducible to our history, but transcends it while really being part of it, something definitively *salvific* for all human beings."

The reflections and autobiographical explorations of Kathleen Norris and Anne Lamott have been widely read and discussed in recent years, and **Wendy A. Weaver** in "**Journeys toward Hope: The Quest of Delbanco's *The Real American Dream* in the Autobiographical Writings of Anne Lamott and Kathleen Norris**" helps us understand why these authors achieve such rich resonance with contemporary American readers especially. Drawing upon Andrew Delbanco's account of the "craving for transcendence" at the heart of modern American culture, and facing up to a cultural tendency to overlook Christianity as an ultimate response to the thirst for transcendence, Weaver shows that both Norris and Lamott find their way to a home in Christianity in their spiritual quests, and she sees evidence of a broader resurgence of Christianity in American life in these autobiographical accounts. Even though many modern commentators have come to regard Christianity as a dated "dead-end" in the search for transcendence, evidence abounds that such a search can end with a deep reaffirmation of Christian faith in contemporary spiritual autobiographies.

We find evidence of the continuing vitality of the Catholic literary tradition in the short stories and novels of contemporary writer Tim Gautreaux, according to **L. Lamar Nisly** in “**A Sacramental Science Project in Tim Gautreaux’s ‘Resistance.’**” Gautreaux, a native of Louisiana and a longtime professor at Southeastern Louisiana University, is “a Catholic writer in the tradition of Walker Percy,” in Gautreaux’s own account quoted by Nisly. Highlighting the ways in which themes such as hope and grace permeate the stories of Gautreaux, Nisly helps us see especially how in Gautreaux’s work we come to understand the ways in which a human being “can function as a conduit of God’s love to the world.”

Readers will recall that from time to time we feature an important document in the Catholic tradition that deserves renewed attention under the feature we call “Reconsiderations.” In this issue, **Robert G. Kennedy** provides a helpful introduction to our reprinting of an address delivered on radio during World War II by **Pope Pius XII** on June 1, 1941. The address marks the fiftieth anniversary of the great social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. Kennedy suggests that while the address breaks no new ground in Catholic social thought, it nevertheless can be seen to “focus attention on the heart of the conflict that provoked the war, which was a conflict between two fundamentally different theories of organizing social life.” Moreover, in Kennedy’s view, the address “anticipates by several decades the writing of Pope John Paul II” in its focus on human dignity at the heart of the issues involving the organization of social life.

We at *Logos* mourn the death of Joseph Schwartz, a member of our editorial board from the time that we launched the journal. His experience as editor-in-chief for eighteen years of *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* has long been an inspiration to us in our work. He will be missed by many students and colleagues.

Michael C. Jordan
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