



GERALD VANN: THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIAN CULTURE

Interview by Paul Philibert, O.P.

Are we in the western world of today living in a society which is being dehumanized and if so in what way or ways is this coming about?

I think the answer to the first question is, undoubtedly, yes. We're all very conscious of the threat of extinction through nuclear warfare which hangs over us; we're not so aware of the danger of a destruction brought about by inner processes of decay. Yet despite the vast achievements of our society in the realm of the various sciences, this possibility of decay does

seem undeniable. It's many years now since the Russian thinker Berdyaev wrote of our present age as being not a crisis *in* but the crisis *of* humanity's history. It's many years since Romano Guardini wrote of how "at the birth of the modern world man lost his living contact with real things" and ceased to be able to "perceive the messages of things," because things had become for him simply "objects of pursuit or possession, of commerce or of research." In Martin Buber's terms, we are living in a world which is concerned more and more exclusively with I-It relationships, less and less with the richness and profundity of I-Thou relationships.

The historical background to all this is a story of a gradual impoverishment: a gradual narrowing down of the scope of our psychic life which, through successive stages of rationalism, *scientisme*, technology, and of an ever-increasing stress on the purely practical and utilitarian, has finally reduced us to our present 'rat-race' mentality. We tend to associate the term 'rat-race' simply with the world of commerce, with man's economic drives and economic objectives; and these have in fact led to a great deal of destruction and degradation, of man as well as of his environment: we denude the forests, we pollute the rivers, and the hills and valleys are turned into slums and slag heaps, and all this we excuse in the name of 'progress,' which too often is simply a slogan masking commercial greed and ignores the fact that in the process of degrading the earth we inevitably degrade ourselves.

But the rat-race has other contexts. There's the social rat-race: the over-mastering urge to 'keep up with the Joneses'—or should one say keep down with the Joneses? There's the rat-race in the sphere of education: the urge to acquire more and more academic palms—degrees, honorific titles, or, in a more homely context, 'good grades'—and, more particularly, the urge to devote one's attention exclusively to what are regarded as the *useful* subjects as opposed to the humanities. "Why waste time learning Greek, or music, or poetry?" people will ask; "Why not do something useful?" It was once well and wisely said that poetry doesn't save the soul but it does make the soul worth saving. Wordsworth would have had more reason today than he had in his own times to talk of how the shades of the prison house close in on the growing boy. The rat-race mentality produces that universal restlessness which is one of the special marks of our society: the lunatic noise and frenzied tempo of life in our modern industrial cities are in fact a reversal of an age-old tradition: we tend to consider silence and stillness as evils, as privations: silence a privation of the beneficent noise which means an escape from thinking, and stillness a privation of the joy of rushing endlessly and restlessly about in order again to escape from thinking.

People are often astonished to learn that the word 'school' comes from a Latin word and a Greek word which mean 'leisure,' the implication being that one can't become educated, one can't become alert, aware, and wise, without keeping still and being silent. The *vacate et videte* of the psalmist represents the exact contrary of the modern idea of education; it also suggests that the rat-race mentality has its influence also in the sphere of religion. Mary of Bethany, sitting still and 'doing nothing' represents the exact contrary of the modern do-gooders. Restlessness is, with us, an effect of rootlessness: long ago Dostoevski warned us of how "our roots lie in other worlds" and when we lose those roots we begin "to fear life" and even "to hate it;" more recently, D. H. Lawrence spoke of how we have lost our roots in nature and in the cosmos, and of the neurotic sickness to which that loss gives rise. It is out of these things, I think, that there grows that feeling of meaninglessness which weighs so heavily on so many in these days; and the meaninglessness produces a sense of loneliness and a sense of fear—fear of life, of the present and of the future precisely because they are lacking in meaning.

What ought to be the Christian reaction to this cultural impoverishment?

Well, Christianity could and should impinge on our society precisely at this level, and do so with great force, as an agent of healing. Christ's question to the two who left John the Baptist to follow him was "What are you looking for?" We're all looking for something; but many of us don't know what we're looking for. Christianity can provide an answer by giving a meaning to life, not just in terms of some other existence, not in terms of 'pie in the sky,' but in terms of this existence here on earth. And by providing a meaning it can heal the world. It can make it whole. Our Lord's words to the cripple, "Do you really want to be made whole?" apply to ourselves. Christianity can heal the psychological atrophy from which we suffer; and it should do so.

It used to be said, 'Don't preach to the starving: give them bread.' The modern equivalent of that might be, 'Don't preach to the psychologically starving—don't preach divinity or spirituality to the psychologically starving or atrophied—give them humanity first of all.' And Christianity of its nature implies humanity; and therefore it includes what we mean by 'culture,' not in any brainy or aesthetic-ivory-tower sense, but simply as an awareness of and a rootedness in the beauty and goodness of the cosmos, our home. Peasants can be, and usually are, in that sense, cultured people. It's the modern urban bourgeois who is more likely to lack that

awareness of and affinity with values—not the utilities, but the values of life, and especially of course, beauty, and the childlike ability to look and listen and to absorb beauty, beauty in the world around us as well as in other dimensions of being. Heraclitus of old spoke of “listening to the essences of things;” and an old Hebrew proverb tells us, “In the mother’s womb man knows the universe; at birth he forgets it.” That loss of the cosmos was spoken of again by D. H. Lawrence when he deplored the shallowness of our modern “cerebral” love, which can so easily become a mere counterfeited love because it’s lost its roots.

Now in the Christian view of things holiness includes humanness; holiness is wholeness. Therefore Christianity can and should restore humanness and holiness to men. But here we come to the tragedy of our present situation in the Catholic world of today: that for us twentieth century western Catholics there is the same tendency to repudiate or to neglect all these ideas because we’ve been so deeply influenced by the prevailing climate of opinion in which we live, the *scientiste*, technological, rat-race mentality, combined with a puritanism and negativism in religious and moral matters which are far from being Catholic, are indeed anti-Catholic, but which nevertheless we seem somehow to have absorbed into our system. Catholics so often nowadays are themselves activists; and religious or moral activism is itself a kind of spiritual rat-race, all spiritual progress being measured in terms of piling up more and more ‘works.’

How can western Catholicism—the teaching Church—hope to confront a society estranged from a recognition of Christian values?

In the Gospel of St. John the Jews asked Our Lord what *works* they should do that they might have the Living Bread; and very pointedly he told them, ‘One *work*’—not many—*one*: “One work God asks of you;” and even so, when he comes to define that work we find it isn’t a work in our modern conception of the term. “One work he asks of you, that is, faith in him whom he sent.” Faith: a loving, personal commitment, an eternal commitment; not an endless eager-beaver activity.

We suffer nowadays, we modern Catholics, from the disease of the obsessive plural. We always seem to have to talk of Christian concepts in the plural. We don’t think of grace as God-given supervitality, as life abounding: we think of graces. We don’t think of virtue, *virtus*, the man of strength and integrity, but of the virtues. We don’t think of sin, the dislocation and disintegration of reality, but of sins. We are not so much concerned with devotedness as with devotions. A particularly striking ex-

ample of this tendency is the common phrase about "saying your prayers"—*prayers* in the plural, which often means that no real prayer takes place, and *saying* them, which implies that unless you're gabbling you can't really be up to much good. You have to be a devotional Martha, because if you're a Mary you're obviously just sitting and wasting time.

This obsessive plural in the context of sin links up with such diseases as legalism, literalism, externalism, that is to say an exclusive interest in and concern with external rules and especially the negative rules, the prohibitions, the taboos, so that the virtuous life comes to be viewed simply in terms of avoiding those external things which are prohibited. Fr. Merkelbach, in his classic *Summa* of moral theology, points out how the divorce of moral from doctrinal thinking in the seventeenth century brought about what he does not hesitate to call the 'ruin' of moral theology. Why? Because it meant in the end that real theological thinking about moral principles was replaced by legalistic casuistry, by superficial rules of thumb and by a preoccupation with the minutiae of objective relativities of guilt or merit. It also meant that, being concerned with negatives, the emphasis would be (as today it is) on fear as the main motive-force behind moral effort: prudence losing its Christian meaning as wise, courageous conduct and becoming simply caution, the cult of 'safety first,' a celestial fire-insurance policy involving a terrestrial timidity which often brings about the destruction rather than the creation of cultural values and standards, for the timorous moralizer will praise a novel, a play, a film because he thinks it is morally safe even though aesthetically it is valueless or indeed disgusting and degrading. This sort of thinking makes the Catholic an easy prey to the puritan inversion of the scale of moral values.

In the Gospel one work only is asked, and it is faith, self-dedication; and one commandment is given, and it is love. The modern Catholic all too often acknowledges the importance of these, but in a vague and abstract kind of way. They can't really, he feels, be very important because few if any neat and tidy, matter-of-fact precepts are given us concerning them. What then are the really important sins for many modern Catholics? The sins that are forbidden by precept, and in particular the sort of sins which have come to be called, even by Catholics, simply *immorality*, as though nothing else but these, the sins of the flesh, were immoral at all. The reason presumably is that these are the sins which most obviously threaten our human frailty, and perhaps also that these are the ones which most of all we have to regard as being not quite *respectable*. When someone says, in that shocked tone of voice which so often veils a kind of smug complacency,

"Have you heard? X and Y are living in sin!" I think the only Christian answer is, "Well, aren't you?" In the Gospel it is clear enough that in Our Lord's eyes the adulteress had indeed sinned, but as between her and those who condemned her there was no question which were the greater sinners.

Now our tendency to adopt such unchristian moral standards shows how deeply we are influenced by our contemporary psychological narrowing-down and impoverishment of life in general. We tend to be Cartesians rather than to share in the breadth and depth of the Christian vision—Cartesians in the sense that we have to have everything neatly, tidily typed and taped and in triplicate, everything tabulated and formulated, and purveyed to us wrapped up in easily handled tags. Frequently the theologian's question nowadays is not—as it was satirically supposed to be in medieval times—"How many angels can perch on the point of a pin?" but 'How many pins would one have to steal in order to make it a mortal sin?'

Instead of the charismatic mentality of the early Christians we seem to have adopted the bureaucratic mentality of our society; and surely there is something radically wrong, dangerously wrong, with this state of affairs. There would be something wrong within the Church if at any given moment you have to say of a Catholic community that its center of vitality, its focal point, is not the chancel (or sanctuary) but the chancery.

Even in our preaching are we not concerned too much of the time with legalities and formalities, the dogmatic formulations and the moral rules of thumb, and slick purveying of facile formulas and tags? Instead of 'opening the scriptures,' which is the purpose of the homily, is not the preacher too often concerned simply to deliver himself of a number of pious clichés or of formulations of doctrine in an ecclesiastical jargon which has no meaning for the world at large, so that what he has to say, if anything, acts simply as a bromide? Certainly the laity feel this lack of reality; and, as Milton said in another context, "The hungry sheep look up and are not fed." The preacher is supposed to be the 'pedagogue' of Christ, and the office of the pedagogue was to lead the boy to school, to lead him to the teacher: the homily is supposed to open the scriptures, to lead the faithful to an understanding not just of the preacher's words, but of the Word's words.

Allowing that the teaching Church should be aware of this psychic and religious impoverishment of her children, how is it to go about communi-

cating her teaching—the teaching of Christ—in a manner which will reach out to the hearts and interest of our contemporaries?

The Church tries to teach us in two different ways. It appeals to the reason in its use of prose—its formulations of doctrine and morality; it appeals also to the heart, the emotional and intuitive faculties of man, in its use of poetry, its symbolism, its ritual. And it is this second language which is essentially the language of Christ, Who spoke to the multitudes in parables and without parables he did not speak to them. He spoke to them in picture-language, the language of symbols; he spoke to them in paradox, which is the property of poetry, of symbol, as opposed to prose. And whether we like it or not, God wrote His book, the Bible, in this same language. But nowadays we have no ears to hear this language.

We don't read the Old Testament. If we are honest with ourselves we shall presumably say that we don't read it because we find it boring. And the reason we find it boring is because we have lost the language; we read it as though it were, let us say, a modern historical textbook—and so of course it is boring, because in fact it is not a modern historical textbook. Erich Fromm, the psychologist, wrote a book on 'the forgotten language,' forgotten to the modern world. It's forgotten to us too, but with us there's this particular tragedy that we of all people should lose the language when in fact it's God's language, the language in which God communicates with us. And because we've lost this language we see the details in Old Testament histories only as boring factual details, not as vital and vivid symbols; and similarly doctrinal formulations become boring to us and our moral formulations tend to become desiccated. For the two ways in which the Church tries to teach us are both essential; each needs the other; they are complementary as reason and intuition are complementary. But today we have only this one avenue of truth; we've lost the other way, which incidentally is mankind's *lingua franca*, the universal language of all humanity.

It's in this language, the language of symbol, as Kerényi pointed out, that "the whole world" speaks. And so, among other tragedies, we tend to lose the power of communicating the Christian reality to other races, other peoples, other traditions, because we can only talk to them in our own particular ecclesiastical jargon. Many of the great Christian words have become either worn from usage like the image on a worn penny, or emasculated by being sentimentalized; and many of the formulations both of dogma and moral principles seem arid and unreal because no longer drawing vitality from their roots in symbol-language, God's language. But some representatives of the teaching Church seem at times to adopt a 'take it or

leave it' attitude, at times indeed they almost seem to go out of their way to make Christianity unattractive and even repellent. It just is a fact that we do sometimes express dogma in repellent language—repellent simply as language, but repellent also in the sense of being unintelligible. Instead of translating facts and truths into the living language of today we use a kind of hybrid tongue which is neither English nor Latin. It seems as though, being too lazy or too illiterate to translate from the Latin (or the Italian) we rest content with transliterating; but to be content to transliterate is precisely to be illiterate.

When we try nowadays to honor the Mother of God with new titles the best we can do, apparently, is to talk of her as 'Co-Mediatrix.' This is unhelpful because by the time you have explained the term accurately you've more or less explained it away; but it is unhelpful also because of its sheer ugliness. They tell of St. Dominic that as he walked the roads of Europe he sang the *Salve Regina*; it is hard to imagine him walking the roads of Europe and singing "Salve, Co-Mediatrix." And one might really be tempted to see all this as a positive *cult* of unintelligibility or unreality.

Take for instance the way in which, without even reflecting on the possibility of there being anything wrong with it, we talk of Christian marriage, the great mystery which St. Paul likened to the union of Christ with His Church, the wedding of two young people who are in love. The Church blesses and hallows their love in the name of Christ; but the jargon in which that love is ordinarily referred to in the Church robs it of all connection with the realities of human love and human life and makes it seem a desiccated, legalistic burden rather than, like Cana, a thing of gaiety and joy. We can't even say 'marriage,' we have to call it 'matrimony;' we can't say 'wedding,' we have to talk about 'nuptials.' Not only that, the nuptials have to be 'solemnized,' so that the whole thing immediately goes glum. As for the boy and the girl, they suddenly (and improbably) find themselves referred to as 'spouses.' And most unreal and most repulsive of all, they find that the physical culmination and consummation of their love is described in terms of a debt. (Incidentally, as another illustration of the way in which we seem to cultivate unreality without even noticing the fact: the Church blesses the boy and the girl and in effect sends them off with their own *Ite Missa Est*: "Go and be happy and creative in the world," but the very next time they're in church they may well find themselves singing one of our most popular and therefore most turgid hymns and asking God that "Earthly joys may fade away"—when, poor young things, their joys have hardly even begun.)

This unreal jargon is pervasive; it comes into all contexts of the life of religion. I got a letter recently from a religious in great distress because God had apparently withdrawn from her what she called *sensible consolations*. The temptation was almost over-mastering to write back and say, "Well, for a start why not try writing sensible English?" How can we possibly expect to have a sane view of life's problems if we don't talk about them in sane language? There is the same sort of contrast between Our Lord's vital, vivid language and the unreality, the niggling timidity, the legalism and negativism of much contemporary jargon. What did Our Lord concern Himself with? "Do you want to be made whole? Do you want life, full and rich and abounding? Do you want truth? Do you want freedom? Do you want the living bread, the joy-inspiring wine? Do you want the life which is eternal, not just hereafter but here and now, because here and now I am Resurrection, I am Life?" How remote that sort of thing sounds—in other words, how remote the Gospel sounds—from the ordinary linguistic currency often found in modern Catholic teaching!

And we have to ask ourselves, I think, just how faithful our picture of the Church, of Christ, of God, is to the Gospel teaching, to Our Lord's own words. Sociologists sometimes make a distinction between two types of society which they describe respectively as *patrist* and *matrist*. The *patrist* society puts an emphasis on legal structure and established convention; it tends to be conservative, restrictive. Now we Catholics speak of "Mother Church," but is the picture we present of the Church in fact a picture of motherhood, or is the accent rather on the *patrist* qualities, on the legal and indeed penal elements in its structure, on the bureaucratic and external rather than the charismatic and internal elements in its life? We are taught by Christ Himself to speak of God as Our Father, but He is the prodigal Father of the parable, just as Christ speaks of Himself as Judge, but also as the hen gathering her chickens under her wing. In other words we have to think of God as our Father but not excluding from that picture the qualities we associate with motherhood.

St. Thomas deals with the paradox of justice and mercy being identical in God; divine justice isn't watered down by occasional acts of mercy; it isn't whittled away sometimes because sometimes God happens to be in a merciful mood. Justice in God *is* mercy. Mercy, *misericordia*, means having a *miserum cor*, a pitiful heart, for the *miseria*, the misery, the wretchedness, of others; and this is a relative thing: the greater the *miseria*, the greater the *misericordia*. Now if *misericordia* is justice, it means that justice too, divine justice, is divinely relative. Unlike human legalistic equity,

it can never be just a rule of thumb, regardless of circumstances, treating people not as personalities but as units, all as alike as a row of pins. The justice of God is concerned with each unique individual human being; and therefore God's justice is not diluted by mercy, it is *determined* by mercy in the sense of being measured by the *miseria* of the person concerned. That's why Our Lord says of one whom the legalists of the Gospel regarded as a great sinner that on the contrary many sins were forgiven her because she loved much.

Does this two-sided way of viewing God have any bearing on the Christian's response to his environment and to God Himself?

Well, of course. As God is both Father and Mother, so the response of man to God has to be similarly paradoxical or double-sided, has to be the response of both a child and of a mature man. In St. John's Gospel story of the Passion he puts great emphasis on the fact that all through it Christ is dominant, is in control of events. He carries the cross, there is no mention of Simon the Cyrenean; and even the moment of death is an action: He bows His head, death doesn't overcome Him; it is He who summons death. At the same time, all the way through the Passion, He is receptive, He allows the humiliations and the tortures to be inflicted on Him. We have to be active indeed, but first of all receptive. Essentially, holiness or morality is not, as the activist thinks, a question of endless 'works,' of feverish activity and frenzied efforts, but of being still and receptive to God. For it's the *acceptance* of life full, rich and abounding that makes real activity possible, by making wholeness and vision possible.

The Cartesianism of so much of our Catholic thinking today does distort the divine truth because it excludes paradox, because it can't cope with paradox. And I wonder whether the primary task of any intellectual apostolate of teaching or preaching today isn't to restore the forgotten language, or rather one should say the 'submerged' language (because it's never really forgotten), so as to restore to us Catholics a wholeness of vision which in fact we've lost. Then, having restored that language, we can begin to restate dogmatic truths and the truths of moral theology in a living idiom, not a desiccated jargon, against the background of that other language, showing for example how the moral law derives from and reflects the personality of Christ—"our law *is* Christ"—and therefore how law and life are identified just as justice and mercy are identified. Then it becomes possible to see morality precisely in terms of a vital growth, a

growth into wholeness, and not as the legalist sees it, as a lifeless (because not life-giving) conformity to a lifeless code.

To say that our society is impoverished and dehumanized is I think true, but the statement needs various qualifications; and one of those qualifications is I think the extent to which nowadays young people are interested in the art and the poetry of their contemporaries. One sometimes finds the 'beat' generation described simply as sick, neurotic people; which I think is a foolish or dishonest generalization: the origin of the beat movement has been explained in terms of a radical dissatisfaction with the meaninglessness of the rat-race, and a search for meaning; and a search for meaning precisely through poetry and music and also sometimes through Zen Buddhism.

Now ought we not to see in this a lesson for ourselves? What are representatives of the teaching Church offering their own young people? We have poetry for them, we have music for them, we have mysticism and religion to offer them, but are we really doing it? In other words are we really opening to them the scriptures; are we opening to them the poetry and music which are in the Gospels and which give meaning to life and wholeness to life? Are we restoring vision? And, as a final question, have we perhaps missed the essential point of the recent emphasis given by the Church to the cult of the Mother of God?

In the story of Cana, Christ addresses His Mother as "Woman," a very respectful but formal mode of address, and unexpected as coming from a son to his mother, the more so inasmuch as John has immediately before referred to her as the "mother of Jesus." The implication is clear enough: as this is the *initia mysteriorum*, the beginning of His ministry, the end of His childhood, so it is the end of her mothering of Him as a child, and the end therefore, at least for the time being, of that, her first vocation; and so he announces her second vocation as 'Woman,' the second Eve—the mother of all humanity.

Now as mother of men her vocation is to lead men to her son and to a better understanding of the Godhead. She, I think, would be the first to be displeased by the fact that this emphasis on her has been directed so to speak solely to herself: to finding new honors for her, elucidating further fine points of doctrine about her, which, alas, so often in fact means merely writing worse prose in her honor, and composing even more turgid hymns, and inventing even more ugly names than before. We give honor to her in so far as through her we give greater honor to God, and we give greater honor to God through her in so far as through her we get

a better understanding of God. And is not the emphasis on her motherhood meant precisely to show us the need of *completing* our picture of God, of remembering the motherhood of God Himself, of leading us back to the way in which motherly mercy is, in God, the same thing as fatherly injustice?

A curious little fact in Christian history: there's a little story about Mary the Mother of God which has come down through the ages from some quite remote past, the middle ages, even the early middle ages, in versions differing in detail but always the same in substance. The story tells of how one evening the Lord thought he would take a stroll around heaven and see how things were going on, and as he went he noticed a number of very odd types who certainly didn't look as though they ought to be there; so he summoned Peter and said, "What do you mean, letting in these very strange, unsuitable people?" Peter after a great deal of embarrassment and attempting to escape the question, was finally pinned down and forced to explain. "Well, Lord," he said, "you see it's your mother. Because *I* always lock the gates at night and I sleep with the key under my pillow; but as soon as it gets dark *she* lets them in through the scullery window."

This story has come down through the ages. And the point of the story obviously isn't that we can somehow appeal to the Mother of God to cheat the justice of God. The point of the story is that the Mother of God *reveals* to us the justice of God by revealing to us the motherly mercy of God.

FEAR AND PERSONALITY

FEAR IS A BASIC WORD in the English language. This is not surprising because it represents a fundamental phenomenon of man's life. Fear is expressed in many different ways and varieties; anxiety, dread, alarm, terror, bolstered by more than a hundred kinds of phobias. Fear is mysterious, even at times paradoxical. Usually thought of as a concomitant of grief of some form, it is also entertaining. Fear expert Alfred Hitchcock says:

Clearly my audiences go to the theater hoping to be scared out of their