

DISPUTED QUESTIONS: ON THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD

In the Middle Ages, the disputed question was one of the major forms of academic investigation. A master of theology would pose a question on which great authorities seemed to disagree, then entertain objections from fellow masters and students. After others attempted to reconcile the various authorities, the master would give a determination that resolved the question.

In our form of the disputed question, two student brothers approach a difficult issue from different angles in order to reveal its complexity. These essays are meant to be complementary, not contradictory. Each of the brothers is then given the opportunity to reflect upon the contribution of the other. The section closes with a final summary provided by the editors, who do not pretend to play the role of master.

THE QUESTION

Gaudium et spes (*The Church in the Modern World*), one of the four apostolic constitutions of the Second Vatican Council, retains even to the present day an impressive ability to speak in a poetic and prophetic manner to the plight of Christ's Church in the present age. The document speaks hopefully of the capacity for Christians to truly renew the face of the earth. Juxtaposed with this optimism are the facts of precipitous secularization of the culture and marginalization of the Church's voice in the public sphere in the decades immediately following the document's promulgation, facts that perdure to the present day. With such a challenge, how optimistic can Christians remain with respect to the bold prognostications proposed by the document? Brs. Edmund and John will endeavor a response.

A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS

Edmund McCullough, O.P.

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. (Is 49:6)

The Church cannot retreat from cultural engagement in the public square without dimming her Christ-proclaiming luminosity. Her bastions of security have indeed been razed, as Hans Urs von Balthasar suspected they would be. And we did not do the razing. If we grasp our situation of being in the world, and use what is at hand to engage it, we may yet succeed in evangelizing and forming a new culture. Von Balthasar argued in 1952 that the Church could more effectively engage the world by removing some of the bulkier barricades constructed over the course of her history. But it turned out that their razing would be more thorough than could have been imagined fifty years ago, with a cultural impetus and result the Church could scarcely have anticipated.

How is the dynamism and expansion of a new culture to be fostered without losing a living fidelity to the heritage of tradition? This question is of particular urgency when a culture which arises from the enormous progress of science and technology must be harmonized with a culture nourished by classical studies according to various traditions. (*Gaudium et spes* 56)

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council sent the Church back into the world to be the lifeblood of the world. In this, they re-



FRANK DICKSEE - THE TWO CROWNS

articulated the mandate already received from Another: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:19).

THE BUNKER

We must acknowledge, upfront, the losses experienced in the past and the risks to this approach in the future. Over the last fifty years, the Church has been pushed out of social and cultural centers and large numbers of her children have disappeared. Given

the condition of culturally and socially marginalized Catholicism, there is a case to be made for rebuilding a bunker.

The advantage of a bunker is security and breathing space for a community. It provides a setting in which Christians can grow in virtue and live truly human lives without violent disturbances. The bunker sacrifices outside engagement to interior health and sanity.

The bishops who drafted *Gaudium et spes* (GS) had all the reasons in the world to build that bunker, but they chose not to. They remembered the war they had all just lived through: the Vatican had not so long before been surrounded by Nazi-occupied territory. The two successive world wars had laid waste their homelands and killed many of their people. They were not blind to the atrocities poorly concealed by the Iron Curtain. Aggressive secularism was not far off on the horizon: It had recently reduced much of the patrimony of Christendom to ashes. But the Fathers of the Council knew, with an insight we would now call prophetic, that the bunker would not help. They had tried the bunker before. Altar-and-throne arrangements, conciliar anathemas, and oaths against modernism had all been attempted and found wanting in certain respects.

By virtue of her mission to shed on the whole world the radiance of the Gospel message, and to unify under one Spirit all men of whatever nation, race or culture, the Church stands forth as a sign of that brotherhood which allows honest dialogue and gives it vigor. (GS 92)

Through long and painful experience, the Church learned and re-learned that only “the radiance of the Gospel” could dispel the darkness of the world. Only by a constant going out of herself to hold up the light of Christ to modern men and women can the Church truly be herself and live in fidelity to her Divine Master.

In light of endemic sexual confusion, threatened Catholic universities, omnipresent threats to human dignity, and general

indifference to religious claims, it is understandable that Catholics are discouraged and want to retire to the bunker. The tragic fact is that now there is no bunker, really. In a world of social media and deeply interconnected humanity, there is nowhere to run. It is incumbent upon us to study the language of faith, the language of modern man, and then to make the effort of translation. The complementarity of faith and reason within the Catholic tradition will make this possible. We can scrutinize the terms used by secular opponents, glean their inner content, and place the truth in them at the service of Truth himself. That is a great privilege and a difficult task. Looked at from a decidedly supernatural angle, difficult times like ours make great saints and memorable works.

PAPA FRANCESCO

Following his immediate predecessors, Pope Francis has stressed encounter and engagement with the world over insularity and retreat. He has been more direct in exhorting all Catholics to get up and get “out there,” so to speak. He has diagnosed the Church with a hypochondria resulting from fear and excessive reflection on our own problems. In meeting the real world, in engaging with it, this hypochondria is cured. If we do not engage with the concrete matter of a subject, we risk becoming turned in ourselves and ignorant of our surroundings, to our detriment and the world’s.

There is a strange and deep confidence in *Gaudium et spes*, but it comes squarely from the Lord operating through the Church in the long history of engaging the world. It is not a “Pollyanna-like” confidence that everything will be fine without action on our part. We are consoled and commissioned in the same breath. That breath is the Holy Spirit, who works in us to evangelize and transform the world.

Some young Catholics, seeing their friends swept off into agnosticism and hedonism, understandably want to pull back and retreat from the life of society. However, it is essential for the life of society that Catholics exercise their full part as citizens. Otherwise,

we leave the formation of our culture to people ignorant of the true good of the human person.

Faith was easier in the bastion. Since its collapse the Church's flourishing and evangelizing capacity are tested continually. The lit candle is now exposed to the wind, but we do have the divine promise that it will not be blown out. We have the arduous task of engaging in artistic, political, and scientific fields. Despite hardship, it is a privilege to live in such a time. Let us not indulge a misanthropic tendency and squander such an opportunity for meeting our contemporaries.

Edmund McCullough entered the Order of Preachers in 2011. He is a graduate of Mount Saint Mary's University and worked in campus ministry before entering the Order. His travels in Spain and Ireland provoked thought on secularization and culture.

BE NOT CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD

John Sica, O.P.

*If you were of the world, the world would love its own;
but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out
of the world, therefore the world hates you. (Jn 15:19)*

Who would have thought, when computers were large enough to fill entire rooms, that they would soon become so small and powerful that anyone could waste his entire morning playing Flappy Bird on his cell phone? You and I have both felt the draw of contemporary technology. Your Gmail account conveniently logs your account details, including how many times you have logged in that day. I am often surprised by how many times I needlessly check my empty inbox, even just between breakfast and lunch. And what of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter? These things have a strange power to draw us in, although they are mostly not entertaining. The preacher seemed to know this when he said: “All things are full of weariness . . . the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing” (Eccl 1:8).

I think that the pull of such amusement on us makes sense. Continued concentration and application of oneself to work are difficult and painful. But amusement is a small refreshment amidst work. The undisciplined person cannot help but whittle away the hours by falling into amusements as a relaxation from the difficulty of work—even if this means failing to meet duties and obligations.

I think this is a good first note to sound when thinking of the Church’s relationship with the world, because we should expect that the problems we see in the individual will be writ large in society. *Gaudium et spes* says “the truth is that the imbalances under which the modern world labors are linked with that more basic imbalance which is rooted in the heart of man” (GS 10). What exactly are the imbalances in the heart of man, and how can they be healed?

This imbalance is like gravitational pull. When you drop an object, it will fall to the ground, unless something stops it. That's how man is: unless, by the grace of God, he strives with difficulty to do what is good, he will fall under the burden. *Gaudium et spes* says that "in man himself many elements wrestle with one another" (10). His nobler part stretches out in desire for a higher life, but the less noble part drives him downwards. It is significant that the document here cites St. Paul to the Romans: "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom 7:15). This is just the way in which *Gaudium et spes* speaks of that problem at the origins of mankind: original sin. The solution is equally important. The individual man "[cannot] achieve his own integrity without great efforts and the help of God's grace" (GS 37). Otherwise, he falls prey to the disintegrative tendency of sin.

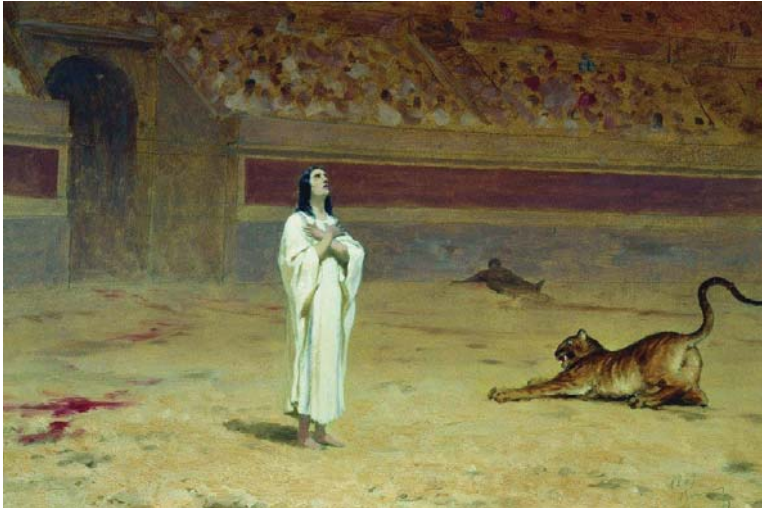
It is impossible to deny that the world has much that is good, both in desire and achievement. But what we must take account of is this disintegrative tendency, which is lodged in the heart of every man, and which works itself out also in societies. "If anyone wants to know how this unhappy situation can be overcome," *Gaudium et spes* says, "Christians will tell him that all human activity, constantly imperiled by man's pride and deranged self-love, must be purified and perfected by the power of Christ's cross and resurrection" (GS 37).

Sadly, our culture's weaknesses extend far beyond wasted amusement. "While human progress is a great advantage to man, it brings with it a strong temptation" (GS 37). Human self-love, working itself out on the level of societies, drives us to become culturally immersed in very grave sin, from which it seems few can extricate themselves. "For when the order of values is jumbled and bad is mixed with the good, individuals and groups pay heed solely to their own interests, and not to those of others" (GS 37).

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Where can we see this “monumental struggle against the powers of darkness” (GS 37)? Where can we see mere self-interest which crushes the weak? *Gaudium et spes* suggests that the economic sphere is one place. Many want to regard the economic sphere as a morality-free zone which has only profits for its concern. Against this, the document notes that “the fundamental finality of this [economic] production is not the mere increase of products nor profit or control but rather the service of man, and indeed of the whole man” (GS 64). For this reason, it also reminds us that “economic activity is to be carried on according to its own methods and laws within the limits of the moral order” (GS 64). How can we live in a society where just wages are paid to laborers and where the purpose of economic activity is not an increase in profit driven by needless consumption? It is unclear, but this much is certain, that the healing grace of Christ is needed. The recent magisterium, including Pope Benedict in *Caritas in veritate* and Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* have continued to stress this difficulty and the need of Christians to conduct economic activity in accord with the Gospel.

Another area where a particular group can pay heed solely to its own interest and not to those of others is war. As Americans, how tempted are we to view the conducting of warfare in terms of mere efficiency? Can we destroy any target, using any means, as long as we achieve the (good) end of an easier and less painful victory? *Gaudium et spes* notes that “any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself” (GS 80). It is drawing out the principle that the direct killing of innocent life is absolutely and universally wrong. Even great convenience—even measured in the lives of many of our fellow citizens—cannot justify such use of so-called total war.



FYODOR BRONNIKOV - MARTYR ON A CIRCUS RING

We can also see this tendency with respect to human reproduction. Much of our society's contemporary efforts immorally thwart the natural process of reproduction. Yet, the reverse also happens. Infertility, which is genuinely a cross, is a problem which is sometimes possible to solve through the use of technology. But what happens when technological efficiency removes the conception of children from the context of the marital act? The recent magisterium has characterized this as "establish[ing] the domination of technology over the origin and destiny of the human person," and has said that this "would be equivalent to reducing him to an object of scientific technology." For when this happens, a child is subjected "to conditions of technical efficiency which are to be evaluated according to standards of control and dominion" (see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Instruction *Donum vitae*).

SAPIENTIA ECCLESIAE

Against all of this, the Church “cannot help echoing the Apostle’s warning: ‘Be not conformed to this world’ (Rom 12:2). Here by the world is meant that spirit of vanity and malice which transforms into an instrument of sin those human energies intended for the service of God and man” (GS 37). The downward gravity of sin requires that we have the assistance of God to bring us upwards. It also requires genuine illumination from God. The Council warns us that “when God is forgotten . . . the creature itself grows unintelligible” (GS 36). So, conversely, what is held under the light of God becomes intelligible in its true meaning.

“The Gospel of Christ,” the Council says, “renews the life and culture of fallen man,” and “never ceases to purify and elevate the morality of peoples” (GS 58). This wisdom, which judges all things in light of God, is the only true antidote for our cultural forgetfulness. It is the only lamp capable of illuminating the meaning of man’s existence and of giving aid to rectify his fallen nature. Although the seeds of the world’s disintegration are sown in the heart of man, this can be overcome with the powerful light of the Gospel and the love of God.

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REPLIES

A REPLY TO *BE NOT CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD*

Br. John raises some excellent points. I agree that all of our self-love and personal sin build a society reflecting that sin, a phenomenon that Pope St. John Paul II termed “structures of sin.” Furthermore, I affirm with Br. John that God’s grace working in and through human efforts is the only thing that can correct this personal and social problem.

However, the link he draws between involvement with the world and the use of technology for increased evil and sin is not as strong as he might tend to argue. Yes, the Fall introduced into the world the “gravitational pull” downwards to sin. Mankind has indeed been sowing disaster in his private and public life since that unhappy moment in human history. But the Fall made it harder to do good, not impossible (presuming, of course, God’s initiative and support for any good work). The desire to live virtuously remains, despite the changed social context and fluid way of living in modern society. Br. John brought up the injustices that are possible in modern economics, war, and reproduction. But these problems are in no sense novel. Injustices in these arenas have haunted the human race since the very earliest times. Let us take the example of reproduction. In ancient Greece, sickly infants were left to die of exposure.

Modern life brings tangible benefits and delivers us from some common sorrows of the past. For instance, NaPro technology has helped countless couples conceive in a morally virtuous way. Infertility is a bitter trial for couples. And it would have been an incurable one fifty years ago. Modern technology can make it easier to be virtuous in that case and plenty of others.

Gaudium et spes speaks favorably of this sort of progress when it states, “When man develops the earth by the work of his hands or with the aid of technology, in order that it might bear fruit and

become a dwelling worthy of the whole human family, and when he consciously takes part in the life of social groups, he carries out the design of God manifested at the beginning of time, that he should subdue the earth, perfect creation and develop himself” (GS 57).

It is possible to live virtuously today. We are not re-enactors desiring to live “in a more civilized era.” We must civilize our own era and work to animate the actual world we live in with the supernatural virtue of charity.

Advances are possible precisely as the fruit of interaction with the world and its technology. For the last fifty years, Catholics have been engaged in more intense contact with the modern world. While there may have been losses, the benefits permit a more fruitful engagement in the here and now that forestalls our pining away with paralytic nostalgia. You may waste your life watching cat videos. But on the other hand, the “powerful light of the Gospel” might shine even on YouTube.

— Edmund McCullough, O.P.

A REPLY TO *A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS*

It would be easy to begin an argument by setting up an opposition between open- and fortress- Catholicism. Who would deny the Gospel mandate to “go ye therefore to all nations?” As Pope Francis has recently discussed, the Church is essentially an evangelizer. It follows quite easily that we cannot choose fortress Catholicism. *Quod erat demonstrandum*. But is this really the right distinction to make?

Catholics understand that there is no escape from the world. We cannot be of the world, nor can we avoid being in it. And yet if we are called to be light, it is because the world is darkness. If we are called to be salt, it is because the world is insipid. If we are

called to be leaven, it is because it is only through grace that the dough of the world can become God's bread.

The "messianic people," which is the Church, "although it does not actually include all men, and at times may look like a small flock, is nonetheless a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race" (*Lumen gentium* 9). Yes, indeed—the Church carries the hope of the whole human race. That is why "it is also used by [Christ] as an instrument for the redemption of all, and is sent forth into the whole world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth" (LG 9).

When St. Thomas Aquinas treats the virtue of charity, he asks a curious question. Which is better, to love our neighbor or our enemy? Since the latter is so much harder, most of us assume that it is better. But Thomas disagrees. It is simply better to love someone who is better. A friend is united in a closer communion with us, and so our love of him is also more intense. We can also see the proof of this in the converse: it is worse to hate one's friend than one's enemy.

Perhaps this is why St. Paul urges us, "as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal 6:10). The house of God is the primary society in which we are bound to practice Christian love. United by the bonds of faith, hope, and charity, sharing in the spiritual goods of the sacraments, and consecrated by our baptism to serve the living God, impressed with his Triune image, we possess a far closer communion than any earthly friends could, let alone than with our enemies. Yes indeed, our first duty is to love those in the household of faith.

This is part of the instinct of most religious life. Cenobitic forms of religious life sprouted up very early in Christianity, the better to be the practice ground of virtue and the setting of Christian charity. It is only in the setting of the intentional community that we can live the fullness of Christian life without the distractions which

the world offers. Of course, it is not an “intentional” community in the casual sense, for it is constituted by God’s intention.

St. Paul prays “that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil 2:15). We make this witness in the midst of the world and yet separated from it. It seems paradoxical, but only our separateness can be the basis for our being salt and light in the world.

— John Sica, O.P.

RECAPITULATION

There is cause for rejoicing here. You may for a time have to suffer the distress of many trials; but this is so that your faith, which is more precious than the passing splendor of fire-tried gold, may by its genuineness lead to praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ appears. (1 Pet 1:6–7)

It seems to me that any attempt to adjudicate between these claims must be reserved to one with a more comprehensive grasp of history and the ongoing presence of God’s providence therein. Perhaps it is reserved to a mystic. Perhaps to a prophet. Perhaps to God alone. It is a nearly impossible task to determine how our historical moment resembles that of past ages and in what ways we are now subject to the inexorable movement of similar historical processes. To even speak of processes already betrays the presupposition of mechanism and historical determinism, a notion more native to Eastern philosophies and perhaps inimical to the spontaneity of the Gospel. Thus, while we must be cautious and conscious lest history repeat itself, we cannot fall prey to the assumption that it must operate as if by some inevitability. How then do we determine when to sound the retreat or with what clarion do we spur on the advance?

Br. John is right to emphasize the moral neutrality of technology, which, nonetheless, is so easily marred in a fallen world. To exercise mercy, one need be both powerful and good. But what if technology serves only to make man more powerful? How can he hope to keep pace in moral integration? Again, Br. John speaks with sober realism in affirming that it is by grace, which God alone authors, that we can hope to renew the face of the earth and reclaim sovereignly the moral universe. In his final response, he follows many before him in proposing that it may simply be the case that the grain of wheat must again fall to the ground and die, as Christians search for new strongholds of sanity, akin to the monasteries wherein the smoldering wick escaped being quenched during those “Dark Ages” of yesteryear.

Br. Edmund is not content merely to die trying but speaks with strident hope in the perpetual imminence of redemptive transformation. Each soul is of infinite merit, and lest a retreat mask an implicit complacency, engagement must continue so long as one Christian has breath, that is, until the end of the age. In his final rejoinder, he echoes the optimism found throughout *Gaudium et spes*, where primacy is given unequivocally and without hesitation to the strong and sweet movement of the God who goes before us in renewing the face of the earth.

I suggest that the apparent contradiction represents a genuine tension that exists within the Church itself, a tension that is not irreconcilable with unity. As St. Paul so beautifully teaches and the Church reaffirms through the ages, there is a variety of vocations in the midst of the one body. There is a true diversity in the graces afforded to each, and there are differences among the shapes of life found in a variety of vocations. Yet it remains true that the transformation of the culture by the intense living out of one’s baptismal promises and of one’s religious vows, marital vows, or ordained ministry is in a sense equally incumbent on all. Each man and woman is called to this engagement according to the exigencies of the particular form of life he or she has embraced.

This will look different for a hermit and for the President of the United States, and yet both participate, if baptized, in the same common priesthood. As the lay vocation is typical for Christians, and as lay holiness is especially a holiness-in-the-world, preachers would not err in adjuring the engagement to which Br. Edmund speaks so insistently. But it remains true that those committed especially to the worship of God seek to do so with equal zeal. By a truly Gospel logic, the two work to the same end, with a unity that only the grace of God can orchestrate.

— *The Editors*