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Charity and Culture

BY

ELLEN JOYCE, S.C.

Introduction

The culture we live in influences us whether we are aware of that influence or not. The first time my curiosity was aroused by the notion of culture was in reading Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) wherein he says:

...what matters is to evangelize man's culture and cultures...always taking the person as one's starting point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God.

The Gospel, and therefore evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures. Nevertheless, the Kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the Kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures. (#20)

The idea of evangelizing a culture was utterly foreign to me at the time. The evangelization of a culture involves, as a first step, developing an appreciative understanding of that culture prior to developing a critique.

My second encounter with culture came when I was assigned to teach a course in ethics that combined a theoretical foundation that was personal with applications that were primarily social. I discovered that one of the ways to move a problem from the personal to the social level was to consider the ethical challenge against the background of the culture. For example, when considering the question of whether or not to televise trials, many reasons can be offered in favor of doing so: it can teach people more about the court system; it can help to develop a sense of civic responsibility, and so on. Yet, reasons can be offered against televising trials. If we approach the question with the eyes of those who think that we live in an entertainment culture, there is a high risk that televised trials can turn into one more form of entertainment. Looking at challenges in the context of the culture can provide a different perspective.

What is Culture?

The idea of culture is an elusive one. A frequently cited definition is that of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, here quoted and commented on by George Marsden in *Religion and American Culture*. Culture is:

'an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols....' The symbols that define a culture are not only words, but all sorts of artifacts and structures that reflect shared meaning and values. The historically transmitted meanings of a culture also include the underlying assumptions, taken-for-granted wisdom, and ways of looking at things that almost everyone at a particular time and place share.¹

Another helpful definition is that of Nathan Mitchell in a wonderfully informative issue of *Liturgy Digest* devoted to an exploration of liturgy and culture:

All those forces personal and collective, public and private — that shape who we are, what we value, and how we interpret people, places and things (ourselves included).²

Persistent exploration and rumination on the idea of culture have brought me to think of it as the human landscape, the human creation, the human milieu in which we live. The latter idea is intended to parallel Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's notion of the divine milieu, an idea captured in the English Benedictine John Chapman's saying that we live in God as fish in water.

Many commentators on American culture use words and phrases such as the following to describe it: it is a culture of individualism, consumerism, fads, entertainment, disbelief; it is a death-denying culture and a one dominated by technology. In *Re-visioning Mission*, Richard Cote cautions against this kind of approach to analyzing a culture:

...not only must we clearly distinguish between the really *inherent values* of a culture on the one hand and ideologies on the other, but that failure to do so is one of the major reasons why inculturating faith is stymied in North America....³

¹ George Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1990), 4.

² Nathan Mitchell, *Liturgy Digest*: 3.

³ Richard Cote, *Re-visioning Mission* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 97.



Elizabeth Ann Bayley, Engagement Miniature.
Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, New York
 Mother Seton, Foundress.
The National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Emmitsburg

Cote illustrates his point by reminding us how, in the past, we confused Russian culture with Soviet communism. Communism was an ideology imposed on the Russian people.

Ideologies always masquerade under the guise of authentic cultural values; that is why they operate so effectively, if deceptively. When unmasked, however, they are seen for what they really are: surreptitious, 'intruders' in a culture, wolves in sheep's clothing as it were. In short, ideologies do not *belong* to a culture by birthright, but by insidious subterfuge. In the same way that it was erroneous (and short-sighted) to equate Russian culture with its former ideological overlay of Soviet communism, so too is it wrong to equate American culture with capitalism, or, for that matter, with any other "ism."⁴

⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

A major task at hand then is to distinguish authentic cultural values of the United States from the distortions, exaggerations, and ideologies of those values. The task is complicated by the sheer pace of change since the 1960s and the leveling power of the mass media.

In a speech at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in September, 1996, Daniel Yankelovich suggested a framework in which to consider what has happened in the last several decades.

In his book, *Life Chances*, sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf describes cycles in Western culture as efforts to strike the proper balance between choices and bonds. Choices enhance individualism and personal freedom; bonds strengthen social cohesiveness and stability.⁵

In a period of expansive choices bonds decline and vice versa. A viable society is constituted by a balance between choices and bonds. A similar point is made by Lisa Sowle Cahill through the work of Mary Douglass. We have moved away from social systems in which role expectations are strong, to private systems in which career and success of the individual are strong. Among the consequences of the latter are the alienation, rather than integration, of the individual in the social whole, the decline of ritual, and blindness to, or denial of, the social consequences of individual choices.

Signs are beginning to appear of a yearning for a new balance of choices and bonds, of private and social systems. Questions of culture are important not only for the broader issue of inculturation of the faith (which some seem to think of as only a Third World challenge), but also because of the disturbing findings of the Nygren-Ukeritis study on the Future of Religious Orders in the United States.

The research...indicates that at the present time religious are often unaware of the degree of their assimilation into the mainstream culture....⁶

Granted the validity of the research, and the current state of the culture, perhaps a good formulation of the current challenge to religious congregations is to avoid assimilation on the one hand, and independence from the culture on the other. Perhaps the challenge can

⁵ *Criterion* (Autumn 1996): 2.

⁶ *Origins* (September 1992): 272.

be put positively in a vein similar to what Cahill proposes for marriage; namely, to resocialize marriage in the direction of equality of partners. For religious, the challenge would be to resocialize their communities to honor anew the real relationships that exist within religious communities.

Toward an Ethics of Attention

In studies of experience several authors point out that our experience is not, and cannot be, normative. We should take it seriously but not make it normative because, among other things, we are selective in what encounters we respond to, that is, in what becomes part of our experience. Our personal histories, the times (postmodern) and culture in which we live conspire to make our individual experiences unique. If we select the encounters to which we respond, there is some choice in it and therefore the possibility of ethical consideration. Both the influence of the culture we live in (and other cultures), and the ways in which those cultures change (within themselves and in relation to each other), need to capture our attention. One modest way to get started on that project is to attend to what cartoonists have to teach us. The cartoonists of *The New Yorker* magazine are the masters of the genre. In the "Crime and Punishment" issue (24 February and 3 March 1997) Tom Cheney depicts a man about to lose his head in a guillotine being asked "Paper or plastic?" *Commonweal*



Main Altar, Basilica of the National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton.
Emmitsburg, Maryland

is another good source of insightful cartoons. The issue of 17 January 1997 has a sketch of one character saying to another, "Persistence? Who has time for persistence?"

Columns that depend on reader contributions can also be revealing. The "Metropolitan Diary" of *The New York Times* (5 February 1997) included this contribution from Cheryl Chalmers: "Bulletin from Living Life in the Fast Lane: a course offered at the 92d Street Y entitled, 'Intimacy: How to Build It, How to Sustain It. One session: 8-10 P.M.'" Who is it we see in these mirrors?

If we attend to cultural change, what about our ideas of charity? While the truths of faith may transcend any given time and culture, they need to be reformulated and inculturated in every age and every culture.

The Meaning of Charity

There has been a resurgence of scholarly interest in the meaning of charity in the last several years. Focus on New Testament ethics, renewed interest in the work of Thomas Aquinas, a critical return to Anders Nygren's classic *Agape and Eros*, and an emerging convergence of spirituality and ethics account for much of this literature. What follows simply illustrates several lines of inquiry.

Some recent studies have challenged an older identification of charity or love with impartiality. Are there not people with whom we have "special relations" such as family, friends, members of our own congregation, those with whom we live, who ought to be treated with some favor? Does not the preferential option for the poor highlight the inadequacy of a norm of impartiality?

While the meanings attached to *agape*, *eros*, and *philia* tend to be nuanced from one author to another, *agape* is usually identified most closely with Christian love, which, in turn is identified primarily with sacrifice. In his book *Love: Human and Divine*, and in several articles, Edward Vacek makes a persuasive argument that *philia*, understood as being-with or communal love, is closest in meaning to Christian love. Though *agape*, *eros*, and *philia* are all necessary, *philia* is the most inclusive love. Within this framework charity is defined as "both God's act and our act."⁷

In recent writings in spirituality there is closer attention to the language used for Christian ideals. For example, the vocabulary of unselfishness is preferred to that of selflessness because there is a self-love or self-regard that is not only legitimate but required.

⁷ Edward Vacek, *Love: Human and Divine* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 113, n.117.

In a lucid article entitled "The Catholic Model of Caritas: Self-transcendence and Transformation" David Tracy, for whom good theory and good practice are always mutually reinforcing, uses correlation method to redefine charity as the transformation of our human loves by God's love.⁸ In Elizabeth Seton we are blessed with a model of transformation.

Charity in North America and Beyond

Elizabeth Seton was a strong woman. It is doubtful that any among us would claim to be finished with "mining" (attending to) the heroism of her life and the depth of her wisdom. A lively, if not heated, conversation was once prompted among us over the possibility that her saying "Sweet is the Providence that overrules us" was a misprint for what should have been "Sweet is the Providence that rules over us." Ultimately there is a prophetic task embedded here if the only way to be sure which prophets speak for God is to know God, then the only way to be sure of what Elizabeth meant is to get to know Elizabeth. In a most profound way, the same task is involved in grasping the ways in which the charism of charity has been planted in North America and beyond. The thousands of women who have followed in the footsteps of Elizabeth Seton are embodiments of the charism. It is in searching their lives, and what they have done and are doing today, that the power and vitality of charity will be revealed. It seems that we have only begun to give attention to what it means to live a life of charity.

In considering whether the charism of charity is relevant beyond all cultures and centuries, charity has a place on a short list. The Word of God is always there, encouraging and challenging us. The human capacity to learn and the experience of suffering seem universal. In a magnificent poem entitled "The Century's Decline," Wislawa Szymborska details how the twentieth century was supposed to improve on prior centuries, doing away with what needed to be done away with, accomplishing what needed to be accomplished. People were to be respected, truth honored, and war banished. By century's end

Again, and as ever,
as may be seen above,
the most pressing questions
are naïve ones.⁹

As long as people exist, charity will be required.

⁸ David Tracy, "The Catholic Model of Caritas: Self-transcendence and Transformation," *Concilium* (1979):121.

⁹ Wislawa Szymborska, *View With a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1995), 148.

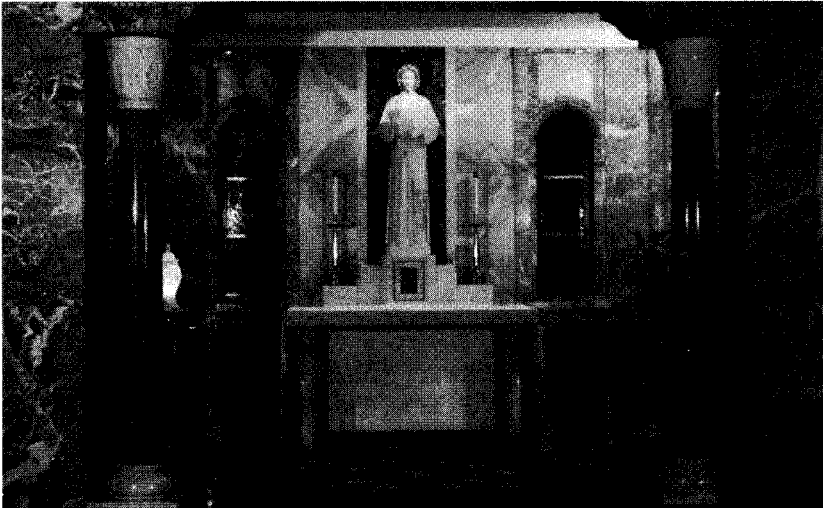
Toward the Future

Several tasks have already been suggested in the course of the presentation. One of the most demanding challenges we face is to discern the ways in which we need to resocialize our communities. There are no blueprints, but those who welcome the truth come to the light.

However, there are a few practices we can begin immediately. Expand the conversation. John Staudenmaier centers attention on the significance of conversation both as an antidote to the potential domination of technology, and as a measure of our relationships with one another and with God. Who is part of the conversation? Who is not? Why? Absent conversation, on what basis do we make the judgements we are responsible to make?

Secondly, keep holy the Sabbath. Celebrate the creation. Break the pace. Give Mother Earth a break!

Perhaps from reflection on the intersection of charity and culture we can come to the point that Paul Ricoeur calls *second naiveté*, "the place where our critical stance toward our inherited faith tradition yields again to the life-giving good news of the Gospel."¹⁰



The Altar of the Relics of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton.
Emmitsburg, Maryland

¹⁰ Joseph D. Driskill, "Silence and Hope," *Contemporary Spirituality Bulletin* (Fall 1996): 36.