Ad Limina

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Recommended Citation

Available at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/ml_studies/vol28/iss1/3
The contributions to this issue of *Marian Library Studies* are situated at opposite ends of the theological spectrum. The first of the two contributions to this issue delves into the possible meanings of a geographically and historically limited cultural phenomenon. The article is about a 19th century primitive painter and his lovingly awkward ways to give artistic expression to religious and Marian themes. If in this essay culture literally absorbs theological concerns without ignoring them, the relation between theology and culture appears to be reversed in the second essay, a major study on the queenship of Our Lady. Here the cultural notion and reality of queenship has been purified and elevated to a theological category. Together, and in complementary ways, the two essays attempt an answer to the difficult question about the relationship between culture and religion in Christianity, and the Catholic Church in particular. The reflection which follows tries to establish a simple and sketchy framework within which to situate the contributions to this issue with regard to culture and theology.

**Presence and Visibility**

Two thousand years of Christian history have taught us that there is a considerable amount of culture in everything the Church stands for. Culture is inextricably linked to scripture. Culture is one of the principal motors of tradition. Some of our theology is in danger of being swallowed up by hermeneutics – a sure sign of the dominance of culture – and many of the Church’s moral principles stand lonely, battered by the harsh winds of cultural relativism.

If culture is in some respect a threat to ecclesial unity and continuity, it is also and simultaneously the very foundation of the Church’s presence and visibility among the peoples. Alas, it is this very foundation that seems to be waverering and crumbling in our days. Cultural Christianity, the glue that sealed for centuries the unity between Church and world, has lost its cohesive power in some parts of the Church (Europe, North America, Latin America) or was never really present and active in others (India, Africa, China). Church and world are drifting apart. Evangelization is in dire need of a new cultural impulse to bridge the gap between truth and meaningfulness, that is to say that the truth of the Gospel needs to be rendered culturally meaningful, not only spiritually but also sociologically and psychologically. The Church is in need of
a higher cultural profile to counteract the progressive dissolution of its identity as world church.

From Confrontation to Transformation

Not so long ago, it would seem, we were led to believe that the relation between Christianity and culture was either confrontational or synthetic.

The confrontational view was based on radical rejection of cultural Christianity as we find it, for example, in Barth's theonomy and actualistic ecclesiology. The synthetic model was founded, for example, on the largely utopian vision of Catholic and Protestant thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries. According to the synthetic model there exists a natural and quasi-spontaneous convergence between culture (of mainly European origin) and Christianity. In the synthetic model, culture is considered perfective of human nature, not only conducive to but inherently convergent with Christianity.

Today we no longer operate with confrontational and synthetic models, but we refer to a cultural model which is based on the idea of transformation, striking a delicate balance between willful rejection of culture and spontaneous convergence between Church and culture. The transformational model holds that Christianity must embody itself in appropriate cultural forms; for a faith that does not become culture is a faith not fully received.1 The transformational model simultaneously stipulates that the Gospel message is above and beyond all cultures. It cannot be reduced to a specific culture, or, as Paul VI taught: The Holy Spirit is supracultural. The Spirit is therefore irreducible to specific expressions of culture.2

The Church's concept of culture rejects relativism for the sake of analogy. It does not consider culture as normative. Cultural analogy recognizes the originality of each culture, but underlines by the same token the inadequacies of each. It holds that there exists a qualitative difference between cultures, depending in part on the degree of harmony with the divine order. Thus, compatibility with the Gospel and communion with the universal Church are among the most important criteria to assess cultures and promote inculturation. It is understood, against cultural relativism, that the Christian message is characterized by a genuinely transformational dynamism. It tends to introduce genuinely new elements in other cultures and religions, and does it through transmission, that is by apostolic dialogue.3

1 OR, 3.
2 EN, 20.
3 CT, 53.
Christian Cultural Analogy

Above all, we should keep in mind that the transformative power of Christianity cannot be reduced to a generous concept of world ethic and ethical abstractions such as freedom, responsibility, solidarity and toleration. Where religious philosophy from Socrates to late Platonism adhered to a God who is infinitely superior to all apparitions found in the world, Christianity perceives God as the one who steps “forth onto the world stage as a particular and special character vis-à-vis other particular and special characters.” Christ remains the same, yesterday, today and forever, confronting humanity with his promise of fulfillment: “I am the way, the truth, and the life”. “Christus totus” whom theologians like Balthasar and Rahner used to describe as *concretissimum ens* is both transtemporal and actively present today. As Ratzinger remarks: “The message of his coming and remaining belongs essentially to the image of himself... If we deny ourselves an existence which allows itself to span these dimensions, we cannot understand him.” Center and motor of Christian cultural analogy is Jesus Christ, the truly concrete universal. God chose the “scandal of particularity” (Ch. Dodd), the once and for all events of Jesus Christ’s life and redemptive action for the sake of humanity.

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4 Balthasar, TD II, 189.
5 Heb. 13, 8.
6 Jn. 14, 6.