

Contemplative Sorrow and the Culture of Life

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that, in order to build a culture of life, we must encourage not only joy at life but also sorrow at its loss. Joy is a passion that results from knowing and receiving what is good. The recognition that life is good must give rise to joy in the person who recognizes that good, both in himself and others. Sorrow, on the other hand, is the passion that results from knowing what is good, and recognizing an absence or loss of that good. As a result, the appropriate response to death, to the loss of the good that is life, is sorrow. Sorrow at a person's death, especially if that death is preceded by suffering, indicates that life continues to be valuable in great suffering, because it recognizes that death is a loss of a good that was present even during his suffering.

JOSEF RATZINGER writes that “art...serve[s] as the wellspring of culture.”¹ The song most played at funerals in the UK, according to a 2014 BBC article, is the Monty Python song “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.”² Here is a sample of the text: “Life’s a laugh and death’s a joke, it’s true,/ You’ll see it’s all a show,/ Keep’em laughing as you go./ Just remember that the last laugh is on you.” Consider this text in contrast to what was sung for at least six centuries at Requiem Masses in the Roman Rite, the *Dies Irae*: “Ah! that day of tears and mourning,/ From the dust of earth returning/ Man for judgment must prepare him,/ Spare, O God, in mercy spare him.”

One text is set as a parody of a Broadway musical; the other is a solemn chant. One text is superficially cheerful; the other is profoundly sorrowful. One text laughs at death; the other mourns it. And, illustrating Ratzinger’s point, one text is from an age in which support for euthanasia is growing rapidly.³

¹ Josef Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 2000), p. 147.

² <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-30143250>.

³ My thanks to Catherine Hughes and David Hughes for their help in working out

This contrast points, I think, to an important element in a culture that protects life, especially in the face of illness and suffering. While the pro-life movement has emphasized joy in life as an essential aspect of a culture of life, I propose that it now important also to emphasize sorrow at death, precisely because so many people have lost an intuitive sense of the horror of euthanasia.

To investigate the importance of sorrow and its expression for a culture of life, I will draw on Thomas Aquinas's theory of the passions, especially joy and sorrow, so as to look at joy and why it is important for a culture of life. I will then argue that, if joy is necessary for a culture of life, so too is sorrow, because both play their parts in forming a culture that recognizes that life is good.

Throughout the paper I will make an assumption with which I presume you will agree, that human life is good. By "life" here I am not referring to how a person lives his life, nor to the attributes or qualities that he manifests throughout his life. By "life" I am referring to that mysterious animation that is the basis of the radical difference between a human being and a corpse.

Joy

That life is good is the reason that John Paul II, to whom we owe the phrase "a culture of life," begins *Evangelium Vitae* with an emphasis on joy. From the second paragraph: "The joy which accompanies the Birth of the Messiah is thus seen to be the foundation and fulfilment of joy at every child born into the world."⁴ Joy is at the center of a culture of life because, as Thomas Aquinas explains, joy is our response to and experience of a present good.

Thomas describes the passions as movements of the sensitive appetite undergone in response to an object. What that response will be is determined by how the subject perceives it and his relation to it. At the heart of all the passions and primary among the other passions is love. Love, Thomas writes, "is complacency in the good."⁵ That is, love is our disposition towards, and

the details of this comparison.

⁴ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican

readiness to receive, the good. We experience the pursuit of that good in desire, which is “movement towards the good.” Finally, when we attain that good, and so when our desire comes to rest, we experience delight. Delight is our resting in and enjoying the good that is loved. It is a kind of resting because it focuses only on that good as good, and not as the pursuit of one good for the sake of reaching some other good. This means that delight is the experience of a good for its own sake.

Human beings are capable of a special and specific kind of delight, which is joy. Joy is a passion that follows from the intellectual apprehension of a present good.⁶ We experience joy when the intellect rests in knowing what is good and in knowing that a good is present. This means that what brings us joy is knowing the good for its own sake and enjoying its presence simply because it is good.

So, it is fitting that John Paul II begins *Evangelium Vitae* with joy. Joy in life is fitting because life simply is good. The joyful person sees the present good of life and rejoices in it, without caveats, conditions, or agendas. There need be no striving, straining, or work to make it good. It is simply good and so we rejoice in it.

To be pro-life is to love life – to see that it is good to be alive, even in the midst of difficulties and suffering. To be pro-life, then, is to experience joy in life -- one’s own and others’ – simply because we apprehend that it is good to be alive, and we rejoice that that good is present.

Contemplation and Culture

It makes sense that in promoting a “culture of life” John Paul II should emphasize joy so emphatically. The experience of joy, the response to the intellectual apprehension of a good that is present and is good for its own sake, is also the experience of contemplation, and it is ultimately contemplation that shapes culture.

Contemplation is the activity of knowing for its own sake. It is knowing, and resting in that knowing. “Rest” here does not indicate a cessation of activity. Rather, it is an intensification of activity that is possible because it is

Province (Allen TX: Christian Classics, 1948), IaIIae, q. 25, a. 2.

⁶ “But we do not speak of joy except when delight follows reason; and so we do not ascribe joy to irrational animals, but only delight.” IaIIae, q. 31, a. 3.

focused on the object of contemplation. Contemplation is intensely internal, and so deeply personal. It involves the intellect in the activity of knowing. It involves the will in directing the intellect to that activity and to maintaining an openness to the object of contemplation. And it involves the passions, as the felt response to the object on which the intellect dwells.

And yet, in genuine contemplation the individual does not enter into his own little world, cut off from everything and everyone else. He reaches out beyond himself to the object of contemplation and, in doing so, he affects the external world. His contemplative relation to his perceived good shapes his manner, his ideas, his actions, and his relations with others.

Culture, of course, involves what is external to an individual: positive laws, customs, rituals, art, music, and the like. But even in this list it becomes immediately evident that the split between the interior life of the individual and the external trappings of a culture is a false dichotomy. Positive laws develop out of the interior lives of the lawmakers and shape the interior lives of the citizens. Likewise, customs, art, music, and the like both shape and are shaped by the interior lives of individuals within the community.

One's interior life is formed by what one loves, by what one dwells on as good. That is, one's interior life is shaped by one's contemplative attitude towards the world. We contemplate what we love, and what we love shapes how we live. As we live, we express in countless, and often subtle ways, that good that we love contemplatively.

When we dwell on the real good, and when the contemplation of that real good continually deepens, so too does joy in that real good. And so it is the contemplation of and joy in the real good that has the power to shape culture healthfully. A culture of life has external expressions that convey that life is good, but it is first and foremost an inner disposition that responds to that goodness with joy. Even though the good of each individual life itself may be mysterious and beyond words, the joy that is shared in a culture of life expresses and affirms that good.

Sorrow

Having laid this foundation, and having made clear, I hope, how much I am in agreement with John Paul II and many others when they call for joy and expressions of joy in life as an essential component of a pro-life culture, I would like to point out an implication of this position. A culture of life, if is

to include joy, must also be open to undergoing and expressing sorrow. In order to be open to life, we must be willing to rest in and accept the pain that is the response to the loss of life.

In accordance with his understanding of human nature as inclined towards the good, Thomas understands all of the passions, including sorrow, in relation to what is good. Whereas joy is the resting in the possession of the good, sorrow is the result of the absence of the beloved object. In sorrow, the movement towards what is good, terminates not with a rest in the good, but with the experience of the privation of that good.⁷

This means that sorrow, like joy, is the fruit of love. Whereas joy is the fulfillment of love in resting with the presence of the beloved good, in sorrow we recognize that our love is not satisfied. The good that is loved is not present and so the subject experiences sorrow at its absence.

The absence of a beloved object is painful, and, Thomas says, sorrow is a pain that is deeper than mere bodily pain. It is “the pain that alone is caused by an interior apprehension.”⁸ Just as joy is not only the pleasure that is experienced in the possession of the good but also involves the intellectual grasp of that good, sorrow is not only pain that is the result of the absence of a good but also involves the intellectual grasp of the absence of that good. As such, the pain of sorrow is deeper than physical pain, just as the pleasure of joy is deeper than physical pleasure, for it penetrates to the very center of the person as an intellectual being.

But, while the privation of the due good is an evil and sorrow is deeply painful, there is also a way in which sorrow is good. It is good to experience joy in a real good, because that is a sign that the subject is rightly related to reality. So too, when there is a real privation of the good, it is good to be sorrowful, because that sorrow is in accord with the way the world really is and recognizes the good as it really is.⁹

Strange as it sounds to say, I would like to suggest that there is some element of rest and contemplation even in sorrow. This is not, of course, to say that we can rest in a lack of good. But we can rest in the intellectual apprehen-

⁷ IaIIae, q. 23, a. 2.

⁸ IaIIae, q. 35, a. 2.

⁹ “Sorrow is a good inasmuch as it denotes perception and rejection of evil.” IaIIae, q. 39, a. 2.

sion of the good. Sorrow, while it is a painful response to the loss of a good, is also a resting in the apprehension of the lost good. In order to feel sorrow, we must apprehend and dwell on the good that is lost.

Sorrow, then, does not attempt to recover the absent good. Neither does it immediately jump to the pursuit of another good, nor even an attempt to obliterate the pain of sorrow. Rather, it dwells on the good, lost though it may be, and so allows for the experience of the deep pain of that loss.

Therefore, sorrow, like joy, calls attention to what is good. It adds to what joy conveys, however, for in calling attention to what is good it also calls attention to the evil of the absence of that good.

Sorrow, Death, and the Culture of Life

I suggested earlier that life is good simply, such that it is good for a person to be alive, regardless of his abilities, talents, or even how he lives. If this is the case, then death is always the loss of a good. When a person dies, a life is lost and so a good is lost. Whether it is the death of a baby in the womb or a death at the end of a long life, whether it is the death of a someone who has lived well or of someone who has lived horribly, death is the privation of the good of life and so should be a cause of sorrow.

As the prevalence of Monty Python at funerals shows, however, the funeral rites and customs of mourning by which we mark a person's death do not express sorrow. Often our response to death attempts to distract from or to diminish sorrow rather than to embrace it. It is not uncommon, for instance, to hear a funeral referred to as a "celebration of life" that understandably attempts to highlight the good of life. But in so doing it allows for neither real joy nor any sorrow. If a funeral is a celebration of an individual's life and yet is something occasioned by the loss of his life, then that life cannot be a very important good to celebrate since the very good that is being celebrated is noticeably absent from the celebration. To "celebrate life" at a funeral deadens the culture of life. It demands a superficial cheeriness and forbids genuine sorrow because it obscures the true good of life, and the true evil of its absence.

Part of our custom in offering consolation to those who are grieving is to suggest that this death was "for the best" or to point to the circumstances around the death that should make it less sad. For example, one might observe that a particular death comes at the end of a long life, or after a great deal of

suffering. That is, in an attempt to comfort others or ourselves, we imply that death is good, because it means avoiding pain. Yet, such attempts at “comforting” are not comforting at all, I suggest, because they are attempts to train the person’s attention away from the good that is lost and to direct it toward some other, lesser goods. They distract us from the evil of death and so from the good of life. Such comforting attempts to lessen a person’s pain, but it does not allow for contemplative sorrow. It urges the person in mourning to move on from that mourning, as if to say that the lost good is really not all that much of a loss, and so not really all that much of a good.

Expressions, both verbal and non-verbal, that ignore or belittle sorrow at death will shape our inner culture, so that we develop a habit of not being sorrowful at death. This inner culture, in turn, shapes how we see death, and so also how we see life. If sorrow is discouraged or repressed, we eventually forget what it is to be sorrowful, and that death is a cause of sorrow, and so we forget that life is a good. If, on the other hand, the appropriate and welcome reaction to death is sorrow, then we are habituated to see the privation of life as an evil and so to see life itself as good.

As we think about our response to euthanasia, I propose that, in addition the important work done in politics, legislation, healthcare, and in offering discursive arguments for the protection of life, we must also be more intentional about how we respond to death – to any death – and we must cultivate the sorrow that is an essential aspect of a culture of life. Whether we embrace sorrow as the proper response to death, or whether we dismiss it – however inadvertently – shapes us and shapes those with whom we interact.

The embrace of sorrow, and the intense inner pain that is characteristic of it, conveys not through words but through how we live, through our inner culture, the idea that pain is not the worst evil. This is especially true as a response to the death of someone who has suffered greatly. Witnessing a person whom we love suffer causes us pain and sorrow. But the death of the beloved causes an even deeper pain because the loss of his life is a greater evil than the pain that he experienced while living. Sorrow in the face of death, then, proclaims that pain and suffering are not the worst evil.

A sorrowful response to death makes it less easy to pretend that death is simply one of any number of choices that a person makes in his life, or one of any other number of chance happenings that occur. When death is experienced as the loss of a real and irreplaceable good, it will be less easy, less “intuitive”

for people to acquiesce in the choice to enable death.

But, perhaps most importantly, the cultivation of and openness to sorrow is essential to a culture of life because only if we are fully open to sorrow can we also be fully open to joy. Of course, sorrow is painful, and we wish to avoid pain. An unwillingness to undergo sorrow, however, is also an unwillingness to love. The danger of loving is that we will be deprived of what we love. If we love, we will experience sorrow. The only way to avoid sorrow is to avoid love, and avoiding love means also forgoing joy. Joy, as this paper explained at the outset, is an emblem of a culture of life because joy is receiving and resting in the goodness of life. But life is a limited good; it comes to an end. Augustine writes: "As soon as a man is born, it must at once and necessarily be said: he cannot escape death."¹⁰ To love, and to love life, is possible only if we accept that the good of the beloved's life will be lost and that we will be pained. If we do not accept that sorrow is a part of life and love, we will neither live fully nor love fully, and so will not be capable of the proper joy that is at the center of a culture of life.

A passage from *The New York Times* demonstrates well both that we live in a culture that is habituated against accepting sorrow, and that sorrow is intimately intertwined with the love of life. It is from an article by a psychologist about the importance of grief, and tells of his encounter with a mother whose six-month old daughter has died:

At this point in her story Mary finally began to weep, intensely so. She seemed surprised by the waves of emotion that washed over her. It was the first time since the death that the sadness had poured forth in that way. She said she had never told the story of her daughter from conception to death in one sitting.

"What is wrong with me?" she asked as she cried. "It has been almost seven months."

Very gently, using simple, nonclinical words, I suggested to Mary that there was nothing wrong with her. She was not depressed or stuck or wrong. She was just very sad, consumed by sorrow, but not because she was grieving incorrectly. The depth of her sadness was simply a measure of the love she had for her daughter.¹¹

¹⁰ Augustine, *Sermones* 97, 3, 3; quoted in Josef Pieper, *Death and Immortality*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (South Bend IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2000), p. 9.

¹¹ <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/10/getting-grief-right/>.