

Gaudium et Spes as a Blueprint for the Culture of Life

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DURING the 1980s when I started getting involved in pro-life activities, there was a sometimes-heated debate about which was more important or essential to the pro-life cause: prayer, direct action, or political activity. Political activists were sometimes criticized by advocates of direct action and spiritual warfare for relying too heavily on man and not enough on God or for neglecting those who were in fact being killed each day. The political activists, on the other hand, sometimes criticized those engaged in direct action for undermining the progress made on the political front because of what was seen by some as extremism or because of the isolated incidents of violence. These three approaches—prayer, direct action, and political action—overlap, of course. There were and continue to be reconcilers, those who hold that each approach has its value and is part of the overall effort to save the lives of the unborn.

I tend to side with the reconcilers in these discussions. However, reflection over the years has led me to believe that even the reconciling position, while true, is inadequate. The three approaches (prayer, direct action, political action) are not simply three independent approaches to pro-life activism but need to be integrated into an overall promotion of a culture of life. The growth of the term “culture wars” in the 1990s leads me to believe that many others are coming to the same conclusion.

I am not implying that my growth in appreciation of this fact is a fruit of my own insight. The necessity of the promotion of a *culture* of life has become especially clear to me in light of the pastoral activities of Pope John Paul II and a close reading of two Church documents. The first document is *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council’s 1965 Constitution on the Church in the

Modern World. The second document is *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical on the promotion of a culture of life. *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), especially as interpreted by John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* (EV), provides a blue print for the promotion of a culture of life. This paper will explore the text of *Gaudium et Spes* in order to determine what insights it gives into the proper participation of the faithful in the establishment of a culture of life in our contemporary context. Although the perspective of this presentation is Catholic theology, the insights gained from *Gaudium et Spes* have an application not only for other Christians but also society as a whole.

I. GAUDIUM ET SPES

Gaudium et Spes was promulgated by the Second Vatican Council on December 7, 1965.ⁱ It is a restatement of the Church's social doctrine in light of the contemporary world situation. *Gaudium et Spes* deals primarily with social reality rather than personal morality or spirituality. The central theme of the document is the establishment of those social conditions that can help safeguard three related values: (1) the dignity of the human person, (2) the common good, and (3) the unity of mankind.

Gaudium et Spes consists of an introduction and two parts. The introduction takes a glance at the contemporary situation (the famous reading of the "signs of the times"). Part I is a developed theological anthropology in four chapters. Chapter one affirms the dignity of the human person as made in the image of God. This affirmation is the basis for all the other affirmations of the document. Chapter one also includes an extensive excursus on atheism since a rejection of God implies a rejection of man's dignity. Chapter two of Part I affirms man's essentially social nature. This is important not only to combat an overly individualistic approach to man's place in the world, but because *Gaudium et Spes* is primarily a social document. Chapter three of Part I emphasizes the value of man's temporal activity in the created world. Chapter four looks at the "role"ⁱⁱ of the Church, institutionally and in its members, in the contemporary world,

specifically in relation to the themes of the first three chapters: the individual, society and man's activity in the world. Part II is the application of the theological anthropology in Part I to various social situations in contemporary societies: family, culture, economy, politics, and international relations, culminating in a consideration of world peace.

The first chapter of Part I of *Gaudium et Spes* is entitled "The Dignity of the Human Person." This principle is at the heart of *Gaudium et Spes* and at the heart of a culture of life:

Coming down to practical and particularly urgent consequences, this council lays stress on reverence for man; everyone must consider his every neighbor without exception as another self, taking into account first of all his life and the means necessary to living it with dignity, so as not to imitate the rich man who had no concern for the poor man Lazarus. (GS 27)

At the heart of the document's theological anthropology is the concept of man as the "*imago dei*" or image of God taken from Genesis 1:27.ⁱⁱⁱ

The use of the term "person" in the phrase "dignity of the human person" is an affirmation that even in his individuality man is already essentially relational and intrinsically social. This means two things: first, the good of individuals cannot be adequately promoted without attention to the social progress; second, that we transform society not only as individuals but also as part of social groups, whether the family, corporations, political units, or the Church. At the same time *authentic social progress cannot be accomplished at the expense of the unique, individual person.*

The concern of *Gaudium et Spes* is not simply or primarily temporal concerns. It is ultimately concerned with the supernatural destiny of man. The temporal activity of the faithful is in fact evangelical: it is concerned with the salvation of man and his entering into the Kingdom to come. Human progress itself is linked to the coming of the Kingdom although the manner of that link is unclear and it is explicitly stated that no amount of human

activity and progress in fact brings about the kingdom (GS 39).

The individual chapters of *Gaudium et Spes* cannot be read in isolation. The order of the chapters shed light on the meaning of the document. For instance, chapters one and two form a kind of dialectic between the uniqueness of the individual and the essentially social nature of human beings. Part I's move from the individual to society to all of creation is intended to counterbalance an Enlightenment overemphasis on the individual and to emphasize the essentially social and material nature of man's existence. At the same time the grounding of all social activity in the dignity of the human person based on the image of God is a safeguard against collectivist and totalitarian tendencies that have had such tragic consequences in the twentieth century.

The order of treatment of topics in Part II is itself significant. The subjects go from the smallest and most intimate social reality (family) to the largest and most comprehensive (international relations).^{iv} However, this must not be taken to imply a priority of the political over the familial, as if the family and culture were the servants of the economic and political. In fact, quite the opposite is true. It is precisely the political and economic that is at the service of culture and family. Peace on the international level, for instance, is the overarching context in which human persons and families can develop in freedom.

II. *EVANGELIUM VITAE* AND THE CULTURE OF LIFE

Evangelium Vitae was issued on March 25, 1995, the feast of the Annunciation. The purpose of the document was to reinforce and expand the Church's teaching on the sanctity of life. It does not simply state the Church's position on various life issues, such as abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment but also promotes a comprehensive program for the transformation of society so that life can and will be protected at every stage.

Evangelium Vitae acknowledges three levels of activity for the promotion of life. First, there is the level of personal morality. One must obey the fifth commandment: "You shall not kill." Nor is it enough to only obey the fifth without giving attention to the other

nine commandments. One must obey all of the commandments, such as “honor your father and mother,” “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not bear false witness,” but also the first three commandments, “You shall love the Lord, your God...” and so on. Our attitude toward God affects our attitude toward the dignity of others.

These commandments provide the absolute minimum for a society that protects life, but they also provide the basis for the promotion of a culture of life. The Holy Father says:

The ‘no’ which [the commandments] unconditionally require makes clear the absolute limit beneath which free individuals cannot lower themselves. At the same time they indicate the minimum which they must respect and from which they must start out in order to say ‘yes’ over and over again, a ‘yes’ which will gradually embrace the *entire horizon of the good* (EV 75).

The second level of activity that *Evangelium Vitae* promotes is the direct defense of life at all stages, from conception to natural death. This level involves both direct action and political action. Not lacking in any approach is the necessity for prayer. The third level of activity, and the one that is clearly at heart of the Holy Father’s vision, is the promotion of an overall culture of life. John Paul II sees the crisis at the end of the twentieth century not only as a crisis of individual morality but also as a social, cultural crisis. “It is not only a personal but a social concern which we must all foster: a concern to make unconditional respect for human life the foundation of a renewed society” (EV 77).

The Pope speaks of a veritable culture of death at the root of the sickness of the twentieth century (EV 12), saying that

a new cultural climate is developing and taking hold, which gives crimes against life a new and—if possible—even more sinister character, giving rise to further grave concern: broad sectors of public opinion justify certain crimes against life in the name of rights of individual freedom, and on this basis they claim not only exemption from punishment but even authorization by the State, so that these things can be done with total freedom and indeed with the free assistance of health-care

systems. (EV 4)

Later he says:

In the background [of the current crisis of life] there is the profound crisis of culture, which generates skepticism in relation to the very foundations of knowledge and ethics, and which makes it increasingly difficult to grasp clearly the meaning of what man is, the meaning of his rights and his duties. (EV 11)

John Paul II talks about the “veritable *structures of sin*” that require transformation of social realities: “This culture [of death] is actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency” (EV 12). Such a cultural crisis demands a transformation of many social realities, including cultural, economic, and political:

To all the members of the Church, *the people of life and for life*, I make this most urgent appeal, that together we may offer this world of ours new signs of hope, and work to ensure that justice and solidarity will increase and that a new culture of human life will be affirmed, for the building of an authentic civilization of truth and love. (EV 6)

One can discern in *Evangelium Vitae* two approaches or moments to the transformation of culture, the negative (or defensive) and the positive (or proactive). One must transform cultures first by opposing those cultural elements that lead to the devaluation and destruction of life. Threats to life include, for instance, “poverty, hunger, endemic diseases, violence and war (3).” The document also includes such things as class struggles, war, arms trade, the environmental crisis, drugs, and sexual promiscuity in the course of its analysis:

And how can we fail to consider the violence against life done to millions of human beings, especially children, who are forced into poverty, malnutrition and hunger because of an unjust distribution of resources between peoples and between social classes? And what of the violence inherent not only in wars as such but in the scandalous arms trade,

which spawns the many armed conflicts which stain our world with blood? What of the spreading of death caused by reckless tampering with the world's ecological balance, by the criminal spread of drugs, or by the promotion of certain kinds of sexual activity which, besides being morally unacceptable, also involve grave risks to life? (EV 10)

According to *Evangelium Vitae*, Catholics and people of good will have to consider that promoting the Gospel of Life involves activity more broadly than directly combating abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment. They must fight against those things in the culture that threaten not only life but also the dignity of the human person in any way. They need to overcome the intellectual, social, and cultural barriers that prevent people from spontaneously affirming life. As mentioned earlier, in order to promote a culture of life, one must obey the entire decalogue, including those relating to religion, sexuality and other social realities:

Detached from this wider framework, the commandment [“You shall not kill”] is destined to become nothing more than an obligation imposed from without, and very soon we begin to look for its limits and try to find mitigating factors and exceptions. Only when people are open to the fullness of the truth about God, man and history will the words ‘You shall not kill’ shine forth once more as a good for man in himself and in his relations with others. (EV 48)

In the second, and more comprehensive, approach to the transformation of culture, one must promote and live out those cultural elements that enhance the dignity of the human person and the common good of society. It is not enough simply to defend life; one must promote it. One must not only be reactive, but proactive.

III. JOHN PAUL II AND *GAUDIUM ET SPES*

The emphasis on culture in *Evangelium Vitae* is not a new insight for John Paul II. This pontificate has been marked by a comprehensive attempt to promote a transformation of contemporary culture in light of the Gospel. He has written

extensively on family, morality, education, arts and sciences, economics, politics, and international relations. As Richard John Neuhaus says:

The message [of the pope] is one of radical humanism. In the future, as in the past, the human project will be threatened, assailed, and brutally battered, but the human project cannot fail. Not finally. The human project cannot fail because, in the person of Jesus Christ, God has invested himself in the human project, and God will not fail. To understand that claim and all its ramifications—moral, cultural, economic, scientific, and political—is to understand the distinctive genius of the pontificate of John Paul II.^v

John Paul II's emphasis on the transformation of culture flows not only from his own genius or insights but also from a profound, decades-long reflection on the texts of the Second Vatican Council, especially *Gaudium et Spes*.

John Paul II's enthusiasm for *Gaudium et Spes* goes back to his involvement in the composition of the text during the Council. Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger, Archbishop of Paris, highlights the centrality of *Gaudium et Spes* in the thought of John Paul II. "Cardinal Wojtyła's personal role was especially vital in the preparation of the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, where the crisis of sense [that is, meaning] which characterizes the end of this century is described with amazing clarity."^{vi} As the Archbishop of Krakow, Karol Wojtyła had a significant role in the shaping of Part I of *Gaudium et Spes*, especially chapter four on the relationship of the Church to society.^{vii} Wojtyła also worked on introduction^{viii} and on the final draft of *De munere ecclesiae* with Alois Grillmeier.^{ix}

John Paul II has positioned his pontificate, both its teaching activity and pastoral activity, as a sustained implementation of *Gaudium et Spes*. He is promoting the kind of universal but also Christian humanism that *Gaudium et Spes* indicates. The popes before John Paul II worked diligently to implement Vatican II. Even before the end of the Council^x John XXIII published *Pacem in Terris* (1963) and *Mater et Magister* (1961). Paul VI published

Ecclesiam Suam (1964), *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Humanae Vitae* (1968),^{xi} and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975). With John Paul II, however, we have a pope who engages in a programmatic and systematic implementation of *Gaudium et Spes*.

This pope's program can be seen by his teachings, pastoral actions, and the overall themes he addresses.^{xii} In addition to his overtly doctrinal encyclicals, all of which are written precisely to implement the Church's mission as affirmed in *Gaudium et Spes* to transform society precisely by proclaiming Christ clearly to the world,^{xiii} and to his ecclesiological concerns,^{xiv} he has written on all of the major areas mentioned in Part II of *Gaudium et Spes*: family,^{xv} culture,^{xvi} the economy,^{xvii} politics, and world peace.^{xviii} He has consistently promoted a culture of life, a new evangelization, and a civilization of love, based on a fundamental affirmation of theme from *Gaudium et Spes* such the dignity of the human person and the importance of freedom.^{xix}

A. PRIORITY OF CULTURE

It is significant that the amount of energy John Paul II has put into the implementation of these themes corresponds precisely to the order they are found in *Gaudium et Spes*. Thus, he seems to favor family and cultural concerns over economic and political, sometimes even interpreting the latter in terms of their relation to the former. As George Weigel points out: "Against the Realist school of historiography and international relations theory, in both its left- and right-wing forms, John Paul argued for the priority of culture over politics and economics as the engine of historical change; and at the heart of culture, he proposed, is cult or religion."^{xx} John Paul II's comments to an American bishop make this emphasis on culture clear:

Your action needs to be both educational and political. There must be a thorough catechesis on the Gospel of Life at all levels of the Catholic community. Catholics imbibe much of their surrounding culture, and therefore this catechesis needs to challenge the prevailing culture at those points where human dignity and rights are threatened. Such a catechesis has as its goal that shift of perception and change of heart

which accompany true conversion (cf. Eph 4:23). The call to conversion must ring out in your homes, in your parishes and in your schools, with complete confidence that the Church's teaching about the inviolability of life is deeply in tune with both right reason and the deepest longings of the human heart. This educational effort will increasingly open the way for Catholics to exercise a positive public influence as citizens of their country, without false appeals to the separation of Church and State in a way that consigns the Christian vision of human dignity to the realm of private belief. The choice in favor of life is not a private option but a basic demand of a just and moral society.^{xxi}

B. GAUDIUM ET SPES 22

It is been noted, even by the Pope himself, that *Gaudium et Spes* 22 is the guiding text for his meditations. It is programmatic for John Paul II. It appears in almost all his major encyclicals, including the first. In a recent letter, he says:

There is no doubt that the climactic section of the chapter is profoundly significant for philosophy; and it was this which I took up in my first Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis* and which serves as one of the constant reference-points of my teaching: "The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a type of him who was to come, Christ the Lord. Christ, the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling" (FR 60).^{xxii}

C. EVANGELIUM VITAE AND GAUDIUM ET SPES

Evangelium Vitae continues the pope's implementation of *Gaudium et Spes*, with an emphasis on the culture of life. The pope is explicit about the connection between the teachings of these two documents. *Evangelium Vitae* cites *Gaudium et Spes* 15 times. The key concept of *Gaudium et Spes*, the dignity of the human person made in the image of God, is clearly the basis for the defense of life at all stages affirmed in *Evangelium Vitae*. Yet, there is even more of a connection than that. It is evident that the inspiration for the very idea of a *culture* of life comes from *Gaudium et Spes*. The Pope sees the promotion of the culture of

life as an aspect of evangelization. It is precisely a *gospel* of life, an integral aspect of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. *Gaudium et Spes* itself is primarily an evangelical document, but one which emphasizes the involvement of man in temporal affairs in the transformation of the world in light of the Gospel.

V. GAUDIUM ET SPES AND THE CULTURE OF LIFE

Of the three levels of pro-life activism outlined in *Evangelium Vitae*—personal morality, direct defense, and cultural transformation—*Gaudium et Spes*, especially as interpreted by John Paul II’s pontificate, gives a blueprint primarily for the third level. *Gaudium et Spes*’s famous reading of the signs of the times emphasizes the cultural crisis that the progress in technology and social sciences have engendered in the modern world. For instance, *Gaudium et Spes* stresses the tension between “traditional local communities such as families, clans, tribes, villages, various groups and associations stemming from social contacts” (GS 6) and contemporary changes, such as industrialization, urbanization, media of social communication and migration. “Hence we can already speak of a true cultural and social transformation, one which has repercussions on man’s religious life as well” (GS 4).

Of course, *Gaudium et Spes* explicitly condemns abortion (GS 51) as well as other threats to life: “Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction” (GS 27). Further, however, *Gaudium et Spes* calls for the eradication of all that undermines or threatens the dignity of the human person:

whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those

who practice them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator. (GS 27)

The ultimate question for *Gaudium et Spes* is how can we shape society so that the dignity of every human person can be guaranteed. Man is social by nature. “Since the social life is not something added on to man, through his dealings with others, through reciprocal duties, and through fraternal dialogue he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny.” A fundamental principle of Catholic social teaching and of *Gaudium et Spes* is the duty of citizens and governments to promote the common good, “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment” (GS 26). *Gaudium et Spes* insists that our social policy guarantees that:

[T]here must be made available to all men everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one's own conscience, to protection of privacy and rightful freedom. even in matters religious. (GS 26)

V. CULTURAL ATTITUDES FOR A CULTURE OF LIFE

Gaudium et Spes elaborates on some of the characteristics of a social life that guarantees the dignity of the human person, including not only principles but also their specific applications. In this last section we will look at these themes especially as reflected in *Evangelium Vitae*.

A. THE HIERARCHICAL UNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON, BODY AND SOUL

One of the fundamental affirmations of *Gaudium et Spes* is the hierarchical unity of the human person, body and soul. A culture of life's understanding of man is neither dualistic nor monistic. It does not separate man's spirit and man's body in such a way that

what happens to man's body is of no consequence to religion. Nor does it reduce man's life to his bodily existence.

There is no room for body/soul dualism which deprecates matter, the body, or other natural, human realities, such as culture or material progress. One must continually affirm "the inseparable connection between the person, his life and his bodiliness" (EV 81).

Though made of body and soul, man is one. Through his bodily composition he gathers to himself the elements of the material world; thus they reach their crown through him, and through him raise their voice in free praise of the Creator. For this reason man is not allowed to despise his bodily life, rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and honorable since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day (GS 14).

On the other hand, a proper Christian approach to temporal realities is not monistic. It does not equate man with his material manifestation or reduce his body to materiality (EV 23). The body and spiritual nature of man are distinct (though not independent) aspects. The important task is to establish the proper relationship of material and spiritual. The proper relationship of material and spiritual is hierarchical. The spiritual in man has priority over the material. *Gaudium et Spes* says, "Now, man is not wrong when he regards himself as superior to bodily concerns, and as more than a speck of nature or a nameless constituent of the city of man. For by his interior qualities he outstrips the whole sum of mere things" (GS 14). Several consequences flow from the hierarchical unity of man.^{.xxiii}

(1) *Priority of persons over things and the collective.* The first two consequences of the hierarchical unity of man are the priority of persons over things and the priority of persons over the collective. First, technical progress cannot be equated with human progress, nor is it adequate for human progress. Man

rebels against death because he bears in himself an eternal seed which

cannot be reduced to sheer matter. All the endeavors of technology, though useful in the extreme cannot calm his anxiety; for prolongation of biological life is unable to satisfy that desire for higher life which is inescapably lodged in his breast. (GS 18)

It is this deeper progress that is the true test of dialogue between men of good will, whether believers or unbelievers. “Nevertheless brotherly dialogue among men does not reach its perfection on the level of technical progress, but on the deeper level of interpersonal relationships. These demand a mutual respect for the full spiritual dignity of the person” (GS 23).

Yet, modern man is often infected by a practical (if not theoretical) materialism that blinds him to his higher nature and calling:

No doubt many whose lives are infected with a practical materialism are blinded against any sharp insight into this kind of dramatic situation; or else, weighed down by unhappiness they are prevented from giving the matter any thought. Thinking they have found serenity in an interpretation of reality everywhere proposed these days, many look forward to a genuine and total emancipation of humanity wrought solely by human effort; they are convinced that the future rule of man over the earth will satisfy every desire of his heart. (GS 10)

One of today’s grave errors is when “man painstakingly searches for a better world, without a corresponding spiritual advancement” (GS 4).

Even social progress itself, though superior to material progress, is not a sufficient understanding of human progress. Social progress must be at the service of the spiritual growth of man:

Hence, the social order and its development must invariably work to the benefit of the human person if the disposition of affairs is to be subordinate to the personal realm and not contrariwise, as the Lord indicated when He said that the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.(GS 26)

This is because our social institutions are at the service of the

whole human person, not just the material. “For the beginning, the subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person which for its part and by its very nature stands completely in need of social life” (GS 25).

(2) *Priority of wisdom over technical knowledge.* For *Gaudium et Spes*, the antidote to practical materialism is a reaffirmation of wisdom over technical knowledge. “Our era needs such wisdom more than bygone ages if the discoveries made by man are to be further humanized” (GS 16).^{xxiv} *Gaudium et Spes* proposes contemplation as an antidote to the culture of business which prevents one from the kind of reflection and devotion to the Creator which a culture of life requires. In fact, man cannot even address temporal, “practical” questions if he neglect the higher potentialities of human persons. Without wisdom, as *Evangelium Vitae* says,

in relation to life at birth or at death, man is no longer capable of posing the question of the truest meaning of his own existence, nor can he assimilate with genuine freedom these crucial moments of his own history. He is concerned only with ‘doing’, and, using all kinds of technology, he busies himself with programming, controlling and dominating birth and death. Birth and death, instead of being primary experiences demanding to be ‘lived’, become things to be merely ‘possessed’ or ‘rejected.’ (EV 22)

This forgetting of wisdom results in a promethean attitude in contemporary culture “which leads people to think that they can control life and death by taking the decisions about them into their own hands” (EV 15). We wind up with “a cultural context frequently closed to the transcendent” (EV 64) and “excessive preoccupation with efficiency” (EV 64). “The so-called ‘quality of life’ is interpreted primarily or exclusively as economic efficiency, inordinate consumerism, physical beauty and pleasure, to the neglect of the more profound dimensions—interpersonal, spiritual and religious—of existence” (EV 23).

(3) *The essential connection between religion and the temporal welfare of man.* According to *Gaudium et Spes*, because man is made in the image of God, religion is an essential part of a culture that upholds the dignity of the human person. “For man would not exist were he not created by God’s love and constantly preserved by it; and he cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to his Creator” (GS 19).

The importance of authentic religion for the proper building of temporal order explains why the problem of atheism plays such a central role in *Gaudium et Spes*. Atheism appears at a three paragraph excursus in the crucial chapter one of Part I right before the very paragraph (GS 22) that has become the hallmark of the papal writings of John Paul II. *Gaudium et Spes* reminds us that atheism is a cultural and social reality in our day, not just an individual attitude. “Unlike former days, the denial of God or of religion, or the abandonment of them, are no longer unusual and individual occurrences. For today it is not rare for such things to be presented as requirements of scientific progress or of a certain new humanism” (GS 7). Underlying all cultural and social transformation is a religious vision of social man. So, an essential action we take for a renewal of the culture is our own interior renewal.

The promotion of the Gospel in its integrity—evangelization—is essential to the proper transformation of society. “For faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God’s design for man’s total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human” (GS 11). The answer the Church gives is that real progress, even temporal, is not possible in any meaningful way without Christ: “The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light” (GS 22). It is Christ who is the image of the invisible God. Each chapter of *Gaudium et Spes* culminates with an affirmation of the absolute necessity of Christ for modern man and his problems, thus making *Gaudium et Spes* an evangelical document as well as one of social doctrine. A lack of active faith, on the other hand, often

leads to despair and destruction. “By contrast, when a divine instruction and the hope of life eternal are wanting, man's dignity is most grievously lacerated, as current events often attest; riddles of life and death, of guilt and of grief go unsolved with the frequent result that men succumb to despair” (GS 21). *Gaudium et Spes* goes so far as to say, “Without the Creator, the creature disappears” (GS 36).

It is clear that Pope John Paul II believes that atheism, the denial of God, whatever the good intentions of those who reject God, will resolve itself in destruction unless confronted with the light of Christ. This is his reading of *Gaudium et Spes* and the underlying prophetic message of *Gaudium et Spes* itself, according to Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger, who says:

Gaudium et Spes casts another, much more discerning look at the current crisis of sense [meaning], where some kind of a counterpoint of the marxist experiment can be detected....Modern atheism (GS 19-21) keeps bearing its deadly fruits. It fosters resigned nihilism and the collapse of values. Man loses heart and sometimes even his rationality when he becomes “an end unto himself, the sole artisan and creator of his own history.” (GS 20,1)^{xxv}

Evangelium Vitae reflects *Gaudium et Spes*'s religious vision in its very title, *Evangelium Vitae*. It is precisely the *Gospel* of Life that the Church promotes. Eclipse the understanding of God and the meaning of man also fails (EV 21). “By living ‘as if God did not exist’, man not only loses sight of the mystery of God, but also of the mystery of the world and the mystery of his own being” (EV 22).

B. PROPER CULTURAL ATTITUDE TOWARD FREEDOM

The exercise of freedom is crucial to the dignity of the human person made in the image of God. “Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness” (GS 17). Man is most himself when he is *subject* of his own destiny, his pursuit of goodness, truth and beauty. That is why, for instance, *Gaudium et Spes* affirms the right to private property in some form. If all property is

owned by the state or the collective, man's responsibility for his own welfare and that of his family is substantially diminished (GS 71). This is also why *Gaudium et Spes* promotes literacy, both literal and cultural, as a means to heightening the dignity of people (GS 60).

Yet, the autonomy of human beings is modified by two conditions. First, man does not determine his own destiny. It is for this reason that our autonomy cannot be exercised as if God did not exist. Second, man shares his destiny with all other human beings and with all of creation. "Since this social life is not something added on to man, through his dealings with others, through reciprocal duties, and through fraternal dialogue he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny" (GS 25). Man's exercise of personal freedom is always seen in light of social responsibility. The affirmation of private property in *Gaudium et Spes*, for instance, is expressed in the context of the universal destination of goods. Man owns property so as to put it at the disposal of the common good.

Gaudium et Spes deals at length with proper and improper understandings of autonomy. "Our contemporaries make much of this freedom and pursue it eagerly; and rightly to be sure. Often however they foster it perversely as a license for doing whatever pleases them, even if it is evil. For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man" (GS 17). The cause of atheism is often an imbalanced emphasis on autonomy. "[Atheists] claim that this freedom cannot be reconciled with the affirmation of a Lord Who is author and purpose of all things, or at least that this freedom makes such an affirmation altogether superfluous" (GS 20).

Evangelium Vitae makes it clear that a false notion of autonomy is at the heart of a culture of death:

It is a problem which exists at the cultural, social and political level, where it reveals its more sinister and disturbing aspect in the tendency, ever more widely shared, to interpret the above crimes against life as *legitimate expressions of individual freedom, to be acknowledged and protected as actual rights.* (EV 18)

C. PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

Another way *Gaudium et Spes* promotes the culture of life is what would come to be known as the preferential option for the poor (Medellin, 1968). *Gaudium et Spes* begins, “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ” (GS 1). For the Council fathers, “faith needs to prove its fruitfulness by penetrating the believer’s entire life, including its worldly dimensions, and by activating him toward justice and love, especially regarding the needy” (GS 21).

When *Gaudium et Spes* lists the neighbors we are to help, they are especially the neighbors in distress:

In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of every person without exception. and of actively helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign laborer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of an unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by recalling the voice of the Lord, “As long as you did it for one of these the least of my brethren, you did it for me” (Matt. 25:40). (GS 27)

In *Evangelium Vitae* the Pope continues this tradition when he speaks of “a certain sense of a *war of the powerful against the weak*: a life which would require greater acceptance, love and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden, and is therefore rejected in one way or another” (EV 12). Solidarity is the virtue which underpins a preferential option for the poor. He emphasizes the defense of the weak against the arrogance of the strong:

But over and above the specific mission of parents, the task of accepting and serving life involves everyone; and this task must be fulfilled above all towards life when it is at its weakest. It is Christ himself who reminds us of this when he asks us to be loved and ser^{xxvi}ved in his brothers and sisters who are suffering in any way: the hungry, the thirsty, the

foreigner, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned. (EV 43)

This notion especially colors the Pope's critique of certain trends in western democracy where the exercise of power by the majority is not based on the fundamental affirmation of the "inviolable dignity of the person, but is made subject to the will of the stronger part" (EV 20).

The program of *Gaudium et Spes* and *Evangelium Vitae* bear a striking resemblance to the much maligned consistent life ethic of the late Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago. Whatever evaluation one makes of Bernardin's particular formulation of the "seamless garment," it is clear that the defense of life requires a promotion of the defense of every living person in all aspects:

Where life is involved, the service of charity must be profoundly consistent. It cannot tolerate bias and discrimination, for human life is sacred and inviolable at every stage and in every situation; it is an indivisible good. We need then to 'show care' for all life and for the life of everyone. Indeed, at an even deeper level, we need to go to the very roots of life and love. (EV 87)

There is, however, even in *Gaudium et Spes*, a hierarchy of issues: *First*, there is: "Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction." *Then*, there is

whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons....

The priority of direct attacks on life, however, does not minimize the significance of these things that "violate the integrity of the human person," or "insult human dignity." *Gaudium et Spes* makes clear that

“all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practice them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator” (GS 27).

D. THE PROPER RELATIONSHIP AMONG FAMILY, CULTURE,
ECONOMICS, AND POLITICS

For *Gaudium et Spes*, the family and the political order are natural to man. For instance, the political community “relate with greater immediacy to his innermost nature” (GS 25). Other institutions, such as cultural and economic, are voluntary. These various institutions, whether natural or voluntary, exist in hierarchical relation to each other. It is necessary to shape the economic and political life of man to preserve the dignity of the human person, to promote the common good and the unity of mankind. The political order is not just a result of, but a cause of culture. As the Pope says in *Evangelium Vitae*, “The fact that legislation in many countries, . . . has determined not to punish these practices against life, and even to make them altogether legal, is both a disturbing symptom and a significant cause of grave moral decline” (EV 4). For this reason those interested in the promotion of a culture of life cannot downplay or denigrate the importance of political action.

Part II of *Gaudium et Spes*, however, makes us realize that social transformation is not exclusively or even primarily political and economic, but primarily familial and cultural. Most of all, there is the family, the fundamental social institution. When *Gaudium et Spes* talks about our essential social nature of man, it first speaks of our creation as male and female (GS 12). As John Paul II reiterates, the family is basic cell of society.^{xxvii} As the first cell of society, family is at the heart of any effort to social transformation.

Any efforts to promote the culture of life will attend to the family. *Evangelium Vitae* repeatedly calls the family the “sanctuary of life” (EV 6) from *Centesimus Annus* (1991).

Concretely, *Gaudium et Spes* emphasizes the importance of motherhood and fatherhood (EV 59). According to *Evangelium*

Vitae a culture of life will exhibit a profound respect for motherhood, with its chastity, fidelity, sacrifice (EV 86). A culture of life promotes the virtues of chastity and purity, as opposed to sexual permissiveness:

A general and no less serious responsibility [for the culture of death] lies with those who have encouraged the spread of an attitude of sexual permissiveness and a lack of esteem for motherhood, and with those who should have ensured-but did not-effective family and social policies in support of families, especially larger families and those with particular financial and educational needs. (EV 59)

Gaudium et Spes emphasizes that family planning must be done by using only licit means that preserve the meaning of human sexual relations. The Church has since reiterated its judgment that only natural means can accomplish this goal (*Humanae Vitae* (1968)). This is further reiterated in *Evangelium Vitae* 13. Contraception is not in itself an anti-life activity, but it contributes to the culture of death because it fosters an attitude of hostility towards babies. “But despite the differences of nature and moral gravity, contraception and abortion are often closely connected, as fruits of the same tree” (EV 13).^{xxviii}

E. PROPER APPROACH TO DIALOGUE

Gaudium et Spes is known for its emphasis on the process of dialogue in the advancement of the temporal order. It affirms the value and necessity of dialogue with all men, whether believer or unbeliever, in working for temporal improvement. “While rejecting atheism, root and branch, the Church sincerely professes that all men, believers and unbelievers alike, ought to work for the rightful betterment of this world in which all alike live; such an ideal cannot be realized, however, apart from sincere and prudent dialogue” (GS 21). The imperative to dialogue flows first from the social nature of man. “Since this social life is not something added on to man, through his dealings with others, through reciprocal duties, and through fraternal dialogue he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny” (GS 25).

The dialogue with the world that *Gaudium et Spes* promotes means that the Church has something to gain from the world. In the dialogue with the world, the Church gains (1) “The experience of past ages,” (2) “the progress of the sciences,” and (3), “the treasures hidden in the various forms of human culture” (GS 44). The law of evangelization is to “adapt the Gospel to the grasp of all as well as to the needs of the learned, insofar as such was appropriate” (GS 44).

One of the types of dialogue is with atheists. Dialogue with atheism is based first on the fact that the deeper cause of atheism is not necessary culpable rejection of God. “In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through such courtesy and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them” (GS 28). Second, dialogue with atheists can occur because grace at work in the world, even among unbelievers:

All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way (GS 31). For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery. (GS 22)

The use of the term “prudent,” implies that the cooperation must be discerning.

The priority of dialogue in *Gaudium et Spes*, however is not on dialogue for dialogues sake but for evangelization. Because the Gospel is ultimately news that can be contested and rejected, despite a necessary irenic attitude in dialogue, confrontation and conflict are unavoidable in the effort to produce a better society. In fact, the Christian who is faithful to the Gospel in his attempts to transform the family, culture, economic and political orders will inevitably experience conflict, confrontation and resistance...and failure. Authentic Christian activity in the world is marked by the Cross: our witness to the culture of life may in fact lead to a martyrdom properly so-called. “As a result, all of human life,

whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness” (GS 13).

Such a drama of truth is evident in the writings and pastoral activities of John Paul II. The Pope’s understanding of the relationship of the Church to the intellectual and political movements of the world was much more dialectic and dramatic than was popular at the time of the composition of GS, but there was an impulse to highlight the tensions more which eventually showed up in the text itself.^{xxix} Many people at the time were blind to the depths of this dark confrontation. “The West was then busy elaborating theories on secularization.”^{xxx} This secularizing trend was also evident even in Christian and Catholic thought. Many, within and without the Church, envisioned “as the inescapable consequence of a cultural evolution leading religion to a painless demise.” The focus of much postconciliar activity was exclusively on temporal concerns and the steady progress to alleviate all human problems. The vision of *Gaudium et Spes* was not clear at the time because of the false optimism which atheists and believers shared. “This may have sounded naive at a time when the Promethian humanism was triumphant and the Church was being charged with failing to liberate man.”^{xxxi} “The Council’s prophetic compassion was an anticipated answer to the current nihilistic resignation which is combined with fear of nuclear or biological self-destruction.”^{xxxii} It is the pope who is fulfilling and expanding the prophetic message of *Gaudium et Spes* at the turn of the millennium.

The possibility of confrontation between truth and falsehood is especially apparent when one engages in direct action, whether political or otherwise. Despite the emphasis of *Gaudium et Spes* and *Evangelium Vitae* on cultural transformation, action, whether direct, political or spiritual is not downplayed. There is no radical dichotomy between direct action and cultural transformation. Mother Teresa gives us clear example that direct, personal action on the part of the poor itself contributes to cultural transformation. Anyone who would deny that Mother Therese has contributed to

social transformation simply because she did not engage in political activity is shortsighted indeed.^{xxxiii} The value of personal witness in cultural transformation is not to be neglected. Nor is the value of prayer, to which Mother Teresa is also a witness.

But, and this is important, direct action must be done consistently with a promotion of the culture of life and civilization of love. In other words, it must be done with an eye toward the dignity of everyone involved: the child, the mother, the medical personnel, and politicians. Any action which does not reflect a profound respect for even the grave sinner does not promote the Gospel of Life, is not authentically evangelical, does not let the light of Christ, which is the only complete answer to man's joys and hopes, anxieties and suffering.

This love and good will, to be sure, must in no way render us indifferent to truth and goodness. Indeed love itself impels the disciples of Christ to speak the saving truth to all men. But it is necessary to distinguish between error, which always merits repudiation, and the person in error, who never loses the dignity of being a person even when he is flawed by false or inadequate religious notions.(10) God alone is the judge and searcher of hearts, for that reason He forbids us to make judgments about the internal guilt of anyone. (GS 28)

The ultimate expression of this respect for the dignity of the sinner is Gospel forgiveness.

The teaching of Christ even requires that we forgive injuries,(12) and extends the law of love to include every enemy, according to the command of the New Law: "You have heard that it was said: Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thy enemy. But I say to you: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who persecute and calumniate you" (Matt. S:43-44). (GS 28)

VI. CONCLUSIONS

In *Evangelium Vitae* John Paul II has issued an urgent call for us not only to engage in action on behalf of life, but to transform our culture so as to establish a civilization of love and truth. For those of us who take this call seriously, *Gaudium et Spes* provides a clear and comprehensive blueprint of the kinds of things which will

help us accomplish such a transformation. This article has just addressed some of the components of a culture of life taken from *Gaudium et Spes*. Let us not forget that this blue print is a religious one. One of the most important cultural activities we can engage in on behalf of life is an effort to reanimate the religious sense among the members of our society, to boldly proclaim Jesus Christ to all the world.

NOTES

ⁱ *Constitutio Pastoralis de Ecclesia in Mundo Huius Temporis*. (1965). The Second Vatican Council, convened by Pope John XXIII and presided over by himself and his successor, Pope Paul VI, met in four sessions between October 1962 and December 1965. The purpose of the Council, according to Pope John XIII, was *aggiornamento*, the updating of Church doctrine and practice so that the Church could better perform its pastoral and missionary activities in the context of a rapidly changing world. The Latin title of the document itself does not use the word *moderna* but rather speaks of the Church *in mundo huius temporis* (“in the world at this time”). The introduction is entitled *de hominis condicione in mundo hodierno* (“on the condition of man in the world of today”). So, it is not explicitly a response to “modernity” as a particular intellectual and cultural movement in history but to the world as it is now, including, of course, the theoretical and practical movement known as “modernity.” The use of the word “modern” in English translations is thus somewhat inaccurate. A dialogue with the world is ultimately much more than a dialogue with intellectual movements. It entails a dialogue on a broader cultural level as well as economic and political. It is clear from the document itself, however, that Western-style modernity has set the agenda for the discussion. Thus, the document begins with the individual person, in the tradition of modernity.

ⁱⁱThe word actually used is *munus*, which, in ecclesiastical Latin, is a much stronger word than “role.” See Janet Smith’s comments on the use of *munus* in *Humane Vitae* in *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Univ. of

America Press, 1991), pp. 136-48. She points to the personal and interior nature of a *munus* in Church documents and its intrinsic connection to “vocation” and “mission.”

ⁱⁱⁱ The emphasis on the biblical *imago dei* “was due to the united efforts of several theologians,” including Congar, Daniélou, Häring, Delhaye and C. Moeller. Charles Moeller, “History of the Text” in Herbet Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 5, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), p. 17. Archbishop Suenens of the Netherlands also encouraged its use. In criticizing the provision text of 1963 he “pointed out that [*imago dei*] did not sufficiently permeate the six chapters as a whole. He emphasized the lack of synthesis between the natural law elements and the message of the gospel” (Moeller, p. 19).

^{iv} *Pace* Moeller, who says: “Logically, the chapter on culture should have been placed at the very beginning of Part II” (p.53, n.72).

^v Richard John Neuhaus, “John Paul the Great” in *First Things* (Feb 1999) 71-72.
<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9902/public.html#john>.

^{vi} Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger, from p.1 of the manuscript of the lecture of October 22, 1998 at the John Paul II Symposium at Mundalein Seminary, Chicago. In his oral presentation he said “difficulties in making out the meaning of this life” instead of “sense.”

^{vii} “In Poland a group of bishops under the aegis of the Archbishop of Cracow, Msgr. Wojty_a, set to work and prepared a text which after some modification was included among the texts discussed at Aricca (Text 4). One of its central ideas was that ‘the presence of the Church does not consist only in the will of God, but also in the will of those who freely belong to it.’” He worked on the draft at Ariccia in 1964 with Congar, Daniélou, Riedmatten, Grillmeier, Hoering, Labourdette, Schillebeeckx, Semmelroth, Tromp, Tucci (Moeller, p. 38).

^{viii} Moeller, p.40.

^{ix} “The fourth sub-group was to revise the text on the Church as

an institution and its saving significance for the world today. This chapter had been newly inserted into the schema at the insistence of Msgr Wojty_ a, speaking on behalf of the Polish episcopate”(Moeller, p.50).

^x He died on June 3, 1963, between the first and second sessions.

^{xi} It is perhaps forgotten that HV is in fact a follow up up *Gaudium et Spes* 51 (n.14) and therefore an implementation and interpretation of it.

^{xii} For an overview of John Paul II’s program, see *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) and *Tertio millennio adveniente* (1994).

^{xiii} See *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), *Dives in Misericordia* (1980), *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986), *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), *Veritatis Splendor* (1993).

^{xiv} See *Dominicae Cena* (1980), *Redemptionis Donum* (1984), *Slavorum Apostoli* (1985), *Ecclesia Dei* (1988), *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994), *Orientalis Lumen* (1995), *Ut Unum Sint* (1995). John Paul II has a tendency to emphasize relations with Eastern Christianity.

^{xv} *Familiaris Consortio* (1980), *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), *Letter to the Family* (1994).

^{xvi} Especially the intellectual life, *Sapientia Christiana* (1979), *Ex Corde Ecclesia* (1990), *Fides et Ratio* (1998); and science and technology, “Dangers of Genetic Manipulation” (1983), “The Church and the Computer Culture” (1989), “On the Ecological Crisis” (1990), “Television and the Family” (1994), “Truth Cannot Contradict Truth” (1996 on evolution).

^{xvii} *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1988), *Centesimus Annus* (1991).

^{xviii} “Address to the United Nations General Assembly” (1979), “Negotiation: the Only Realistic Solution to the Continuing Threat of War” (1982), *Women: Teachers of Peace* (1995).

^{xix} See *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), “Freedom of Conscience and Religion” (1980).

^{xx} George Weigel, “John Paul II and the Priority of Culture” in *First*

Things (Feb. 1998): 19-25.

^{xxi} John Paul II, "Action Must Be Educational and Political: Letter to Cardinal William Keeler," *L'Osservatore Romano* (March 10, 1999), p.4.

^{xxii} See also *Tertio millenio adveniente*.

^{xxiii} An excellent philosophical explanation of the hierarchy of human goods and the practical impact such a hierarchy has on life issues, see Fr. Robert J. Spitzer, S.J., "The Life Principles: A Model for Teaching the Philosophy of the Pro-Life Movement" in *Life and Learning VIII*. See also Fr. Spitzer's *Healing the Culture: A Commonsense Philosophy of Happiness, Freedom and the Life Issues* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000).

^{xxiv} It was not always clear during the three years that went into the composition of the document that *Gaudium et Spes* would emphasize spiritual as well as technological progress. As Charles Moeller points out, there was a division among the bishops and *periti* on where to place the emphasis. It is interesting to note, in light of the fact that the future John Paul II was among them, that it was the Polish episcopacy that advocated for a prominent place for non-technological aspects of progress: "At this time a division, though a fruitful one, appeared in the commission, between those who stressed external civilization, i.e. its technical elements, and those who stressed wisdom, objective truth, play, the non-utilitarian. Some experts from Poland, in particular, stressed the latter features" (Moeller, p.52).

^{xxv} Lustiger, p.1.

^{xxvi} John Paul II addresses our responsibility to the weak in EV 78 and to the poor and those in need in EV 87.

^{xxvii} See *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) 42.

^{xxviii} Kevin Miller, "The Incompatibility of Contraception with Respect for Life" in *Life and Learning VII: Proceedings of the Seventh University Faculty for Life Conference*, ed. Joseph W. Koterski, S.J. (Washington: UFL, 1998), pp.80-126.

^{xxix} "The Subcommittee for Culture, with Msgr. Guano as chairman, endeavored to give a clearer structure to the chapter,

and especially to insert a more complete description of culture with its tensions and antinomies. For it was considered that this chapter had turned out too idyllic.” Moeller, p.52.

^{xxx} Lustiger, p.2.

^{xxxi} Lustiger, p.2.

^{xxxii} Lustiger, p.2.

^{xxxiii} But can her address at the Prayer Breakfast so easily be divorced from its political implications?