

The “Culture of Death” as a “Structure of Sin”*

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ABSTRACT: In his 1995 *Evangelium vitae* Pope John Paul II teaches that our culture of death is, among other things, a “structure of sin.” This essay inquires into the meaning of this term in the thought of the Second Vatican Council and of John Paul II and explains its applicability to a culture in which abortion, euthanasia (even if “only” voluntary), and the like are commonplace. I argue that culture should be thought of as a matter-form composite. A culture of death is one that has been malformed by, for instance, an individualistic conception of the human person. For this reason it has a material element that includes pressures and inducements to participate in sins against human life. It follows that our task is to persuade our culture to respect human life for the right reasons, which requires in turn evangelization of our culture.

I HAVE SUGGESTED elsewhere, in multiple contexts, that Pope John Paul II’s 1995 encyclical *Evangelium vitae*¹ (*The Gospel of Life*) might most fruitfully be read as a treatment of the differences – on multiple levels: practical, philosophical, and theological – between a “culture of life” and a “culture of death.” The encyclical contrasts what has gone wrong in a culture of death and what needs to be made right in order to build and sustain a culture

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¹ This and other Catholic Church documents referenced herein can be found at the Holy See's website, vatican.va. In the notes to this paper, *Evangelium vitae* will be abbreviated as EV.

of life. By approaching the encyclical in this way, one can, for example, understand rightly what John Paul means by “serving the Gospel of life” and why he thinks this is necessary.² Or, more specifically, one can well understand why, in addition to rejecting abortion and euthanasia entirely, he also rejects, for nearly all practical purposes, capital punishment.³

In this paper I would like to focus on one of the ways in which John Paul II describes a “culture of death”: as a “structure of sin.”⁴ This term expresses a concept that has a history in Catholic social teaching that can be traced back to the Second Vatican Council’s 1965 *Gaudium et spes* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*).⁵ I shall first explicate in general what the concept refers to and then indicate one of the ways in which it was applied by John Paul II prior to *Evangelium vitae*. Then I shall inquire into what John Paul means by it in this encyclical specifically. I shall argue that the structure of sin that is the culture of death, or one aspect of that culture, is composed of material and formal elements. The material element comprises the ways in which the availability and utilization of practices like abortion and (even voluntary) euthanasia creates “pressures” on others to utilize these practices. The formal element is the individualistic and utilitarian anthropology that is embedded in the onto- and theo-logic of society (to borrow David L. Schindler’s Balthasarian language).⁶ In order to convert a culture of death into a culture of life, it is necessary to replace these elements by their opposites. In John Paul II’s view, the formal element of society needs to be a personalist (rather than an individualist) philosophical anthropology⁷ and a personalist

² Kevin E. Miller, “‘Serving the Gospel of Life’: Theological Meaning and Health-Care Applications” (delivered at the twenty-sixth annual meeting of University Faculty for Life, Milwaukee, 2016).

³ Kevin E. Miller, “Mercy, Justice, and Politics: John Paul II on Capital Punishment” (Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 2011).

⁴ In the original texts: *peccati institutum*, EV §12; *peccati structuram*, EV §59.

⁵ It is to be noted that while John Paul II takes up this concept, he also offers some cautions about its misuse in his *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* (1984) §16.

⁶ E.g., David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 180.

⁷ For which St. John Paul II, among others, is known. See, e.g., Karol Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok (New York NY: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 219–61. For considerable analysis, Kenneth L. Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philo-*

(rather than an atheistic or extrinacist or dualist) theological anthropology.⁸ The practice of solidarity⁹ needs to be its material element.

“Structures of Sin” in *Gaudium et spes*: Interpretation

In *Gaudium et spes* we read: “When the structure of affairs is flawed by the consequences of sin (*ordo rerum sequelis peccati afficitur*), man, already born with a bent toward evil, finds there new inducements (*nova...incitamenta*) to sin, which cannot be overcome without strenuous efforts and the assistance of grace.”¹⁰ What does the Council mean by this?

All sins potentially have various “ripple effects.” If a business owner sins against an employee by underpaying her, this sin will affect not only her but also her family, and beyond them still others like the owners and employees of the businesses at which she and her family shop (or would shop were the owner not underpaying her). Even a sin that is primarily a sin against God rather than man is also a sin against other human persons, for harming our communion with God *ipso facto* harms our communion with others, whether they know of our sin or not.¹¹ Additionally, whenever we sin, we risk giving scandal (from the Greek σκάνδαλον, “stumbling block”) to any others who are aware of our sin.¹² Most especially, one’s sin can set a bad example to others.

I want to suggest that, beyond ripple effects and bad example, the notion of “structures of sin” involves a further way in which our sins can hurt others.¹³

sophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II (Washington, DC: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1993).

⁸ In the sense developed by Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco CA: Ignatius, 1988), chs. 11-12.

⁹ Among the first things that alerted me to the importance of solidarity in the thought of Wojtyła/John Paul II was John F. Crosby, “Max Scheler’s Principle of Moral Solidarity and Its Implications for the Pro-Life Movement” (paper delivered at the fifth annual meeting of University Faculty for Life, Milwaukee, 1995). As I shall indicate later in this paper, solidarity is a theological as well as philosophical category for John Paul II, which makes it possible to contrast solidarity with sin. Compare Pope Pius XI’s discussion of “social charity” in *Quadragesimo anno* (1931) §88.

¹⁰ *Gaudium et spes* §25.

¹¹ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, p. 33.

¹² For Thomas Aquinas’s treatment of scandal, see *Summa theologiae* II-II.43.

¹³ Not necessarily beyond “scandal” in all possible senses of that term, though. See

In my view, the term designates the way in which a sinful action has distorted (one might say “warped”) the structure (or fabric) of society or of one of its dimensions (for instance, the economic) in a way that creates pressures upon others to sin.

By analogy, in Einstein’s general theory of relativity, gravity is the warping of spacetime near massive objects. This warping has the effect of curving the trajectories of nearby objects unless they expend sufficient energy to avoid this effect. In many popular depictions, a piece of elastic black fabric, with a white grid drawn on it, is shown stretched by a frame. A heavy ball is placed in the middle of the fabric, visibly warping it. When a smaller and lighter ball is rolled across the fabric through the warped region near the heavier ball, its trajectory curves toward (around or even into) the heavier ball.

A structure of sin results when someone’s sin has, analogously, warped the fabric of society. Others “nearby” (in, say, the same economic sector) feel a kind of “force” that tends to curve the trajectory of their own actions, unless they resist.

Suppose, for example, that I own a manufacturing business. I am doing very well, but am greedy and want to make still more money. Knowing that (for the sake of argument) the labor market is favorable to owners and unfavorable to workers, I impose upon my employees an unjust wage cut, thus lowering my costs. I now also lower the price that I charge for my product. If I cut my costs by more than I lower my price, I can still make more profit per product item sold while simultaneously increasing my sales – that is, taking sales away from my competitors. I am increasing my total profit in two ways simultaneously. I am *also* creating economic pressure on my competitors at least to consider doing to their employees what I have done to mine, so that their businesses can remain competitive. It would take some hard work, that is, an expenditure of energy, combined with some luck, on the part of their owners to find other ways to cut production costs or to improve their product without increasing those costs if they are to remain competitive without doing what I have done. My sin of greed and injustice has created a structure of sin.

The above is an example of a structure of sin in the economic dimension of society. To be sure, this is not the only type that can occur. Society is multi-dimensional. It has familial, cultural, political, legal, and international

Aquinas’s reference to “inducement” (*inductione*) in *Summa theologiae* II-II.43.1c.

dimensions¹⁴ as well as an economic ones. Structures of sin can occur in these dimensions too. In fact, as the language of “dimensions” might suggest, they tend to interpenetrate each other. Any given set of points in a society is likely to exist in more than one of these dimensions at the same time. As a result, any given structure of sin is likely to have multiple dimensions, e.g., economic *and* legal, cultural *and* political.

What I have described so far – the “forces” that our actions impose on others and the constraints that these forces tend to place on the actions of others – is only what I am calling the material element of a structure of sin. Just as society in general has a formal as well as a material element, so do those structures of sin that are found in society. But why should we think that society has a form (apart from some general a priori commitment to Aristotelian metaphysics)? Although the answer that I offer here is not the only possible one, it seems to me that we may experientially regard ourselves as both constituting society and (at least to some extent) constituted by, society.

This point is especially noticeable when the society of which we are thinking is the family. Being a son or a daughter, a brother or a sister, a husband or a wife, a mother or a father, and so on is not something that is simply stacked on top of anyone’s identity. It is a constitutive part of one’s identity. This is perhaps most obvious with regard to one’s familial role as a son or a daughter since no one can exist at all except as the son or the daughter of one’s parents, for no one comes into existence without parents.¹⁵ But, I think, it is also true with regard to other familial roles, to those roles that are not essential to basic human existence, and to those roles that come to be adopted sometime after one is born. For instance, one may or may not already be a brother or a sister when one is born. One is certainly not already a spouse or a parent at that point: such roles tend to be adopted voluntarily. I claim that experience suggests and philosophical reflection confirms that when I married my wife, being “Kim’s husband” became part of my inner identity and will remain so at least “as long as [we] both shall live.”

Further, this seems to be true not only of familial roles but also of at least

¹⁴ Compare the five chapter headings in *Gaudium et spes*, part 2.

¹⁵ Human cloning would, of course, obscure or even alter this reality. See Leon R. Kass, “Family Needs its Natural Roots” in *The Ethics of Human Cloning*, ed. Leon R. Kass and James Q. Wilson (Washington DC: AEI Press, 1998), p. 82.

some other social roles. We are, by nature, not only familial but also, in a broader sense, social – and even political, as Aristotle argues. Our social relationships and roles come to be parts of our identity. Now, by qualifying these statements (“to some extent constituted by society” or “part[s] of our identity”) I mean that what I am saying should not be taken in a collectivist sense. It is not true that I am nothing but the sum of my social relationships.¹⁶ Indeed, in that direction lies totalitarianism. But neither am I, by nature, nothing more than an individual, with relationships nothing more than hats that I wear (sometimes more than one at a time, like the cap peddler in the children’s story).¹⁷ What I am proposing here is, in short, the “personalist” anthropology mentioned above.

If I am right in holding that an individualistic (as well as a collectivistic) philosophical anthropology is mistaken, then it follows that society cannot be simply the sum of the material parts – the human persons (or “individuals”) – who make it up.¹⁸ If society were nothing more than the sum of its individual parts, then, while each of those parts would contribute to making a society what it is, a society would have no capacity to contribute to the identities of those parts – no role to play in the formation of their individual identities. Therefore, if society does so contribute, then there must be more to it than being the sum of those parts.¹⁹ What could that something “more” be? It seems to me that it is something like a form, in the Aristotelian sense. But if society necessarily has a form, then it is capable of being “malformed.” Furthermore, it should be clear from what I have said that when individualistic assumptions are brought to bear and acted upon in society, this will constitute such a malformation since such assumptions contradict the basic and essential truth

¹⁶ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, p. 358.

¹⁷ Esphyr Slobodkina, *Caps for Sale* (New York NY: W. R. Scott, Inc., 1940).

¹⁸ As John Paul II explicitly says about the family in his *Letter to Families* (1994) §17, and as he implies in his concept of subjectivity of society in *Centesimus annus* (1991) §§13, 46. For a response to reductionistic readings of this concept, see Schindler, *Heart of the World*, pp. 130-31. True subjectivity is violated by individualism as well as by collectivism, as will be seen below in the next section of this essay.

¹⁹ Let me note that this critique of an individualistic philosophy of person and society is also, equivalently, a critique of a voluntaristic account of society, e.g., of a social-contractarian political philosophy such as liberalism in its broad sense.

that society indeed has a form.

My claim is that it is this “bad form” that is the formal element of certain structures of sin. Consider again the above example of the greedy and unjust business owner. If I act in such a way, I am manifesting a bad understanding not only of the proper role of money in life but also of human relationships. I am treating others (especially my employees, but also my competitors and their employees) as means to the end of gaining more wealth. And precisely insofar as I am treating them only as means, I am treating them not as subjects (with an inner spiritual life – soul or form – of intellect and will and capable of true human action)²⁰ but as mere objects. I am treating them not as beings that call forth from me by their nature a response of justice and love but as things that can be disposed of in accordance with whatever choices I wish to make (for instance, as mere commodities in the labor market).²¹ This misunderstanding of the human person is the bad form of the structure of sin that my action creates.

“Structures of Sin” in John Paul II

Before turning to *Evangelium vitae*, I want to note one of the applications of the concept of structures of sin that can be found in an earlier writing by John Paul II. Doing so will further illumine the meaning of the concept. In his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis (On Social Concern)*,²² he makes multiple uses of the term *structurae peccati*.²³ Earlier in the same encyclical, he seems to appeal implicitly to this same notion without using the term in his

²⁰ In fact, it is my own inner spiritual life, with its capacity to know the truth and love the good, that gives me the capacity for those loving relationships with others that become part of who I am. On a deeper level, it is my capacity for God that gives me the capacity for these relationships: de Lubac, *Catholicism*, esp. p. 340.

²¹ In short, I am treating them in accord with a Hobbesian and/or Lockean account of justice. For what I find to be a persuasive reading of the relationship between Hobbes and Locke, see Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1950), ch. 5. As John Paul II recognizes in EV §20, justice and law in the view of Hobbes and Locke are but a matter of “compromise” and “everything is negotiable.”

²² This encyclical is explicitly intended by John Paul II (see §2) as a revisiting of the theme of Pope Paul VI’s *Populorum progressio* (1967), and is in turn revisited by Pope Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in veritate* (2009) (see §8).

²³ *Sollicitudo rei socialis* §§36-40.

analysis of the Cold War.²⁴ According to this analysis, the United States and the Soviet Union sometimes treated countries of the developing world not so much in accord with their real needs but as mere pawns in the U.S.–USSR struggle.²⁵ He also speaks of the “subjectivity” of the society and of the nation (*civitas*) as well as of the wrongness of the objectification of a “people.”²⁶ It would seem that the structure of sin that he discusses in his treatment of “nationalism” has as its form a kind of objectification analogous to individualism.

For John Paul II, the prospect of the manipulation of one nation by other nations would not be a problem if those nations did not have their own proper subjectivities. His treatment of the Cold War situation as a structure of sin is also important for two further reasons. First, papal biographer George Weigel has mildly criticized *Sollicitudo rei socialis* as suggesting a moral equivalence between the Western and Eastern/Communist blocs.²⁷ A correct understanding of the concept of structures of sin and its application to the Cold War situation should put such concerns to rest. But it should also make clear that John Paul II was not uncritical of the West. On the one hand, the person (or the nation or the bloc) pressured into sin by a structure of sin created by another is not as guilty as the creator of that structure. There does not exist a simple moral equivalence between them. On the other hand, though, one who deals with pressure to sin by giving in to it and sinning is not simply without guilt. John Paul II challenges the view that there is any absolute or near-absolute moral disequivalence between the ways in which the U.S. and USSR acted during the Cold War, just as there is no such disequivalence between those who create

²⁴ In fact, he refers to both the Cold War blocs and to “structures of sin” in the same sentence in §36: “It is important to note therefore that a world which is divided into blocs, sustained by rigid ideologies, and in which instead of interdependence and solidarity different forms of imperialism hold sway, can only be a world subject to structures of sin.”

²⁵ *Sollicitudo rei socialis* §§20-24. Apart from the choices that we (and the USSR) made regarding what sorts of economic relationships to have with developing-world countries, there is also what I call the “He may be an SOB, but he’s *our* SOB” school of international relations. That this way of thinking is not unique to the Cold War and persists today in both major American political parties requires, I assume, no argument.

²⁶ *Sollicitudo rei socialis* §15.

²⁷ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York NY: HarperCollins, 1999), pp. 559-60.

and those who “give in” to structures of sin.

Second, another of the key categories in *Sollicitudo rei socialis* is “solidarity.” Introduced in §9, the term makes a total of 28 appearances in the encyclical. John Paul suggests that it is the opposite of a structure of sin: “instead of...solidarity..., structures of sin.”²⁸ Moreover it is the remedy for those structures.²⁹ On a philosophical level, solidarity is practiced when members of society respond adequately to the personhood and subjectivity of others, in justice and in love, so as (among other things) to support virtuous (rather than evil) action by those others. In addition to the moral sphere, solidarity responds to other needs as well, e.g., to material needs. At the same time, it responds to material needs as a component of its response to moral needs. On a theological level, solidarity is a type of charity and a kind of overflowing of “communion” from the Church into society,³⁰ and so in a more radical and more thorough way it supports the growth of others in holiness.

“Structures of Sin” in *Evangelium vitae*

In light of the above, what does the characterization of the “culture of death” as a “structure of sin” mean in *Evangelium vitae*? It would seem, first, that John Paul II has in mind the way in which the availability and the fairly widespread practice of abortion and of euthanasia (including assisted suicide) create pressures to take part in these practices upon individuals who might not otherwise be inclined to do so. John Paul II is far from being alone in noting this phenomenon. Activists against “voluntary” euthanasia (“assisted suicide”) and on behalf of the sick, elderly, and disabled have frequently made the point that when this practice becomes “normal” in society, patients will be given less assistance of various kinds for coping with the medical situations that are causing them to suffer or otherwise to be vulnerable. Instead they are expected to take society up on its offer of “assistance” in dying.³¹ Society will, as it

²⁸ *Sollicitudo rei socialis* §36.

²⁹ *Sollicitudo rei socialis* §§38-40.

³⁰ *Sollicitudo rei socialis* §40. That there is a relationship between communion and solidarity is already suggested by *Gaudium et spes*’s somewhat similar descriptions of both (on communion, §23; on solidarity, §§32, 38). The distinction and relationship between the two is further clarified in John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America* (1999), chs. 4-5.

³¹ See, e.g., Maggie Karner’s words in Wesley J. Smith, “Maggie Karner Dies

were, become organized around the practice of euthanasia rather than around the practice of authentic medicine and related kinds of support (like authentic social work) in hospitals and hospices and elsewhere. Even when a particular patient's care team – family, friends, professionals – do not actually want her to kill herself with the “healthcare” system's help, she may still feel expected to do so insofar as she knows that many others in her situation are expected to do this by those around them, and inasmuch as society in general expects (and even wants) many people like her to do so.

Similarly, abortion begets abortion, so to speak. There will always be crisis pregnancy centers, despite the abortion industry's attempts to neuter them.³² To a considerable extent, though, society has organized itself³³ around the availability, the legality, and the provision of significant public funding³⁴ of abortion. For example, if two similarly situated women get pregnant and one

Naturally of Brain Cancer,” *National Review* (28 September 2015): <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/maggie-karner-dies-naturally-brain-cancer-wesley-j-smith/> (accessed 12 October 2019). Leon R. Kass agrees that the availability of voluntary euthanasia distorts social relationships: “Socially, there will be great pressure on the aged and the vulnerable to exercise this option. Once there looms the legal alternative of euthanasia, it will plague and burden every decision made by any seriously ill elderly person -- not to speak of their more powerful caretakers -- even without the subtle hints and pressures applied to them by others.” See “Death With Dignity & the Sanctity of Life,” *Commentary* [March 1990]: <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/death-with-dignity-the-sanctity-of-life/> (accessed 12 October 2019).

³² Consider presidential candidate and South Bend, IN, Mayor Pete Buttigieg's attempts to prevent one from opening in his city, as detailed in Alexandra DeSanctis, “Playing Politics with Pregnancy in South Bend,” *National Review* (1 May 2019): <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/05/playing-politics-with-pregnancy-in-south-bend/> (accessed 12 October 2019).

³³ See *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833, 860 (1993): “An entire generation has come of age free to assume *Roe*'s concept of liberty in defining the capacity of women to act in society, and to make reproductive decisions.” It will be noted that this is hardly intended by O'Connor, Kennedy, and Souter as a criticism of the effects of *Roe*.

³⁴ This includes very significant continued funding of Planned Parenthood, even after its withdrawal from Title X funding, since according to the organization itself: “Most of Planned Parenthood's federal funding is from Medicaid reimbursements for preventive care, and some is from Title X” (Miriam Berg, “How Federal Funding Works at Planned Parenthood”: <https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/blog/how-federal-funding-works-at-planned-parenthood> [accessed 12 October 2019]).

chooses to have an abortion while the other chooses to bear and raise her child, the one who “chooses life” will typically be at some significant social disadvantages, whether educationally or financially. These are deeply interrelated. The economics of child-raising make it hard to stay in school even if school is free, let alone when the tuition is considerable.³⁵

This is the material element of the structure of sin that John Paul II is discussing in *Evangelium vitae*. What I said above about the formal element of many kinds of structures of sin applies here also. In his analysis of the differences between the cultures of death and of life, John Paul notes the paradox in speaking of a “right” to such unjust actions as abortion and voluntary or involuntary euthanasia. In fact, there cannot be a right to what is not right and just. The problem arises from an objectification³⁶ and instrumentalization of the human person, a denial of solidarity, and an individualistic conception of society.³⁷ To build a culture of life, the practice of solidarity is needed, as John Paul indicates in many places in the encyclical (especially in chapter four). It is necessary to practice solidarity not only with the unborn baby and the sick, the elderly, and with disabled persons but also with a mother who is in difficulty and who might face pressure to abort her

³⁵ John Paul II does not say that these social structures are the only driver of abortion, nor are they in fact. Consider the account of Amy Richards as told to Amy Barrett, “When One Is Enough,” *New York Times Magazine* (18 July 2004): <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/18/magazine/lives-when-one-is-enough.html> (accessed 12 October 2019). Put differently, whether or not one perceives something as a social disadvantage can sometimes depend on whether one values having over being or vice versa (see *Sollicitudo rei socialis* §28, *Centesimus annus* §36, and *EV* §98). Of course, on the other hand, the same logic that malforms social structures into structures of sin can also play a role in misshaping one’s sense of the relative values of having and being.

³⁶ Lest this word seem extreme, consider this, from Canada: Kelly Grant, “Medically assisted death allows couple married almost 73 years to die together,” *Globe and Mail* (1 April 2018): <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-medically-assisted-death-allows-couple-married-almost-73-years-to-die/> (accessed 12 October 2019): “‘We witnessed, many years ago, someone we loved very much, a family member, who lived for several years and turned from being a magnificent human being into somebody you couldn’t recognize, that lay in bed and made noises,’ Mrs. Brickenden said. ‘We thought then, ‘Well, I don’t care what happens when we get to zero. When we know it’s the end, we’re not going to do that.’”

³⁷ *EV* §§12, 19–20.

baby.³⁸ She too is among the vulnerable – morally as well as in other ways.

Solidarity is formed by the theo-logic³⁹ (as well as of the onto-logic) of the culture of life. For instance, John Paul II writes: “The Spirit who builds up communion in love creates between us a new fraternity and solidarity, a true reflection of the mystery of mutual self-giving and receiving proper to the Most Holy Trinity.”⁴⁰ Similarly, the structure of sin that is an element of the culture of death is malformed by its bad theo-logic. John Paul II has a reason for sketching out a theological anthropology in *Evangelium vitae*.⁴¹ He sees it as relevant to the foundations of a culture of life, and its denial to the foundation of a culture of death. To summarize this theological anthropology, the human person was created with the capacity and desire for a relationship with God, as indicated by the phrase “image of God” in Genesis 1 and in the symbol of God’s life-giving breath in Genesis 2. This relationship is restored to us and perfected in us by Jesus Christ. We must live it out through a life of love of God above all things and of neighbor on the model of how Jesus has loved us. Why is this relevant? Why does a faulty theological anthropology that denies this point necessarily give rise to a culture of death, with its faulty theological anthropology and its practical or surface manifestations of a lack of solidarity and disrespect for human life? After Nietzsche,⁴² the question of why and how my morally good action is good “for me” (for the would-be predator as well as for the potential prey) cannot be ignored – as if it could ever have been ignored. I claim that in the view of John Paul II – and in reality – this question is fully answered only by the Christian message about our capacity for God (*capax Dei*) and as a consequence our desire for supernatural relationship with God and, in God, with other human persons. Because of this capacity and desire, right relationships (in justice and charity) with other human persons fulfill us rather than (as Nietzsche worried) enslave us. But if

³⁸ EV §88.

³⁹ Let me point out that *every* culture has one as part of its form; the very claim by a culture that it is even *possible* not to have one would already represent a theological position: a theo-logic.

⁴⁰ EV §76.

⁴¹ EV §§34-36.

⁴² See, e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York NY: Random House, 1967), pp. 19-20.

this is so, then solidarity must be, as John Paul II says, something that flows out of a *communio* that is Trinitarian, Christological,⁴³ and ecclesial.⁴⁴

Philosophical reasoning is, to be sure, capable of taking a significant step toward the view that we have a capacity for others. One sees this already in Aristotle, for whom practicing interpersonal virtues like justice and friendship – being in right relationship with others – fulfills our human nature qua rational and brings true happiness (εὐδαιμονία). And, of course, knowledge (including knowledge of others, their natures, and what they consequently deserve) is a kind of union between the knower and the known.⁴⁵ But I want to suggest that this Aristotelian approach may not be enough. An intellectual-rational union is not yet the fully ontological union that is proposed in Catholicism and in at least some other versions of Christianity.

Intellect and will are very closely linked. It can certainly be said that in human beings having a will presupposes having an intellect. If I were capable only of sense perception, then my actions would be determined by the strengths of the various sensory stimuli at any given moment. It can also be argued that having an intellect entails having a will: what I can know to be possible, I can intend. But it may not always be obvious to philosophical reasoning alone in what way the will should obey the intellect. In that case, it becomes hard (even if not impossible) to say why *Wille zur Macht* should not be seen as the meaning of life, and why turning that will back on itself should not be seen as slavish and deadly. Now, when John Paul speaks of the “war of the powerful against the weak,”⁴⁶ he implicitly reminds us that such a war is not necessarily fought to establish a totalitarian state but could be waged simply so that the powerful will not be the “slaves” of the weak.⁴⁷ The powerful, for Nietzsche and in our culture of death, often simply want “to be

⁴³ The hypostatic union, as understood by St. Cyril of Alexandria, Ephesus, Chalcedon, Leontius of Jerusalem, and Constantinople II.

⁴⁴ See the many references to the Church as communion in Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (1964).

⁴⁵ For Aristotle’s epistemology, see *De Anima*, book 3.

⁴⁶ EV §12.

⁴⁷ Having explicitly mentioned Nietzsche and then again alluded (“*Wille zur Macht*”) to him, I want to suggest, without argument that would be beyond my scope, that this is likely his view.

let alone.”⁴⁸

But when “freedom...no longer recognizes and respects its essential link with the truth”⁴⁹ and when the desire to be let alone is in conflict with the truth about the other, then for the sake of being left alone one will be ready to treat the other in a way that fails to accord with that truth. Put differently, the wish to be let alone can be enough to produce the outcome of which John Paul II speaks: “Everyone else is considered an enemy from whom one has to defend oneself.”⁵⁰ At the same time, one possible way in which this bad logic (malformation) can evolve is in the direction of calls for state action to suppress anti-individualist tendencies. Even when anti-individualist actors do not directly threaten individualists, their very presence can be seen as threatening to individualist structures. Consider, for example, Britain’s treatment of the Charlie Gard and Alfie Evans families. Ironically, individualism can evolve into a kind of totalitarianism.⁵¹

In any case, John Paul II is correct to think that if the foundational logic of a culture does not include the theo-logic of the Gospel, then that logic will be the onto- and theo-logic, the (bad) form, of the kind of “structure of sin” that characterizes a culture of death. In such societies pressures abound to take part in practices like abortion and euthanasia. These pressures impose themselves not only on mothers, on the sick, on the disabled, and on the elderly, but also on health-care professionals.

Conclusion: Evangelization of Culture

The logic, then, needed to re-form the social order from a structure of sin and a culture of death into an embodiment of solidarity and so a culture of life is a personalist onto- and theo-logic. On the philosophical level, this means a logic that attends especially to the subjective dimension of the human person -- that is, to the objective reality of this subjectivity, which includes its objective

⁴⁸ See Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, “The Right to Privacy,” 4 *Harvard Law Review* 195 (15 December 1890); *Olmstead v. United States*, 277 U.S. 438, 478 (1928) (Louis Brandeis dissenting); *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113, 152 (1973).

⁴⁹ EV §19.

⁵⁰ EV §20.

⁵¹ See David L. Schindler, “The Repressive Logic of Liberal Rights: Religious Freedom, Contraceptives, and the ‘Phony’ Argument of the *New York Times*,” *Communio* 38 (2011): 523–47.

orientation toward truth. The objectivity of this logic means that it can be understood as continuous with the metaphysical anthropology of Aristotle and Aquinas, for human beings have an intellectual and spiritual nature. In his pre-papal writings, Karol Wojtyła suggests that modern philosophy, with its turn to the subject, achieves a valid and worthwhile insight into the irreducible nature of this subjectivity, so that the human person is not adequately understood as simply a member of a species.⁵² As Pope John Paul II, he expressed his appreciation of the contributions of modern philosophy even while also reminding us that apart from the metaphysic of the Scholastic and especially the Thomist tradition, the turn to the subject can be problematic -- for example, by obscuring the connection between freedom and truth.⁵³ On the distinctively theological level, the re-formation of the social order requires a logic that recognizes at the very heart of the human person a natural capacity and desire for union with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. God has graciously offered to us a means for the actualization of that union, and thereby for union with all others who are offered this same union. Contemporary thought often fails to be properly philosophically personalist, especially by ignoring the objectiveness of our subjectivity and our relationship with truth. Further, it fails to be properly theologically personalist, especially by being practically and even theoretically atheist -- by teaching people to live as if there were no God or at least no God who can be called "our Father" in the Christian sense. This is to say that contemporary thought needs to be evangelized. Ironically -- as de Lubac recognized decades ago -- some of the same post-medieval Catholic thinkers who might have had a sense of the urgency of the task of evangelization might also have unintentionally undermined it by promoting an extrinсист and dualist theological anthropology that denies the openness and desire to which I have referred, thereby making grace seem only questionably relevant to nature and marginalizing the Gospel message. De Lubac's historical and substantive claims remain controversial, of course. I suggest that the continued criticism (or lack of awareness) of his metaphysical (and to a lesser but real extent of his historical) claims among those who would take up the Church's evangelizing task is a problem.⁵⁴ I suggest that there is a

⁵² Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, p. 211.

⁵³ John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* (1998), passim.

⁵⁴ Clearly, a detailed rehearsal of this debate would be far beyond my scope. For

reason that Vatican II, in its document that is fundamentally about the world's need for Christ and the Church, makes what is likely to be a Lubacian claim about the human person.⁵⁵ I suggest that there is a reason that Pope John Paul II's first encyclical, only months after he began his papacy with a call to open ourselves to Christ, and meant especially to constitute the start of the new pope's program of preparing the Church for the Great Jubilee Year 2000, reiterated the Council's claim and explained it in an even more clearly Lubacian way.⁵⁶ I suggest that there is a reason that the same pope sketched out this anthropology in the context of his treatment of the cultures of death and of life in his *Evangelium vitae*. I suggest that there is a reason that John Paul II's successor, Pope Benedict XVI, concluded his papacy, and began the Year of Faith, with a still clearer statement of the Church's acceptance of de Lubac's anthropology.⁵⁷ This anthropology is the anthropology of evangelization, the anthropology that provides the theo-logic of solidarity and a culture of life.

The task of dismantling the structure of sin that characterizes the culture of death and of replacing it with solidarity is for everyone. Everyone can practice solidarity. In doing so, one is already embodying the logic that corresponds to the truth about the human person. One is already allowing the matter of one's life and actions to be informed by this logic. Perhaps one might expect a *moral theologian* to conclude with a call to this action (by encouraging everyone to do things like volunteer at a crisis pregnancy center or pro-life hospice). On the other hand, perhaps one might expect a *moral theologian* – an academic – to insist on the importance of understanding the

the latest intervention in the debate (broadly sympathetic to de Lubac's reading of Aquinas): Jacob W. Wood, *To Stir a Restless Heart: Thomas Aquinas and Henri de Lubac on Nature, Grace, and the Desire for God* (Washington DC: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2019).

⁵⁵ *Gaudium et spes* §22. See David L. Schindler, "Christology and the *Imago Dei*: Interpreting *Gaudium et Spes*," *Communio* 23 (1996): 156–84.

⁵⁶ John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis* §10: "Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it. This...is why Christ the Redeemer 'fully reveals man to himself.'" We have a natural desire for an encounter with precisely that love that is made known to us by God the Son.

⁵⁷ Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, 16 January 2013: "The desire to know God truly, that is, to see God's face, is innate in every human being, even in atheists."

truth that gives form to this call to action. I do not wish to disappoint those with this latter expectation. One who wishes to re-form the structure of sin of which John Paul II writes in *Evangelium vitae* into an embodiment of solidarity needs to be able to persuade others to join in his or her actions with regard to social justice and social charity.⁵⁸ Some, but not all, others will be persuaded by the simple attractive force of justice and charity, the desirability of the good of the human person that is (part of) the truth about the human person – the “truth about the good.”⁵⁹ Still others, though, will not “do the truth”⁶⁰ without a more precise understanding of this truth. And perhaps most importantly, one might question whether doing the good based on a faulty understanding of the truth will suffice to re-form society, at least if I am correct in suggesting a form-matter relationship between bad onto- (including theo-) logic and structures of sin, and between good logic and solidarity.

There are in fact many people who oppose abortion and euthanasia, but do so on the basis of an individualistic understanding of why we ought not harm one another. Put differently, they do so on an understanding of “rights” that, while not yet Hobbesian, is nevertheless distinctively modern. Its argument is that we are the sort of creatures who are autonomous individuals by nature and therefore (even when vulnerable) have a right to life. It does *not* recognize that we are by nature relational and made for solidarity. It does not integrate its understanding of rights into such a recognition. It still sees relationships in individualistic and voluntaristic terms. Someone whose pro-life position is of this sort might well make a point of campaigning and voting for pro-life candidates and measures, and even volunteering to enter into such relationships as enable them to assist in providing positive care to the vulnerable (such as by working at crisis pregnancy centers).

This position is intellectually and spiritually vulnerable to cooption by something like Nietzsche’s critique: If I am not such by nature that I am always already related to others, including those whose lives are at risk in the

⁵⁸ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§1928–1942 connects the two, beginning with its definition of social justice, which refers to the (social) conditions that allow others to obtain their due. By creating such conditions, one is beginning to practice solidarity.

⁵⁹ See the repeated references to “the truth about the good” in John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor* (1993), passim.

⁶⁰ John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor* §84.

Hobbesian war waged by the culture of death, then entering into voluntary relationships in defense of what I call the “rights” of others might be self-dehumanizing. This is why I think that defeating the structure of sin that is the culture of death requires doing the right thing for the right (evangelical) reason: with the intention of re-forming society’s individualistic malformation.