On Reading *Evangelium Vitae* as a Social Encyclical[1]

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Introduction

John Paul II's recent letter on faith and reason is the thirteenth encyclical of his twenty year papacy. Three of the thirteen are social encyclicals in the traditional sense. They explicitly place themselves within the line of social encyclicals which stretches from *Rerum Novarum*, published by Leo XIII in 1891, to *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II's encyclical to mark the centenary of Leo's letter in 1991. This line of encyclicals has dealt with social, economic and political questions and reflects all the great events and changes of the 20th century. John Paul II marked the ninetieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* by publishing *Laborem Exercens* (1981) and the twentieth anniversary of Paul VI's great encyclical *Populorum Progressio* was honoured with the publication of *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987).

But John Paul's encyclicals include also a number which might be termed 'cultural encyclicals' or 'encyclicals of cultural critique'. Where the traditional social encyclicals, charting a middle road between the extremes of communism and capitalism, work within the general social and democratic drift of twentieth century development, these cultural encyclicals sound a more critical and, it may be, a more radical note. The letters I include under this rubric are *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) and *Fides et Ratio* (1998). It is the middle one I want to consider here.

Why this encyclical?

Evangelium Vitae (EV), 'on the value and inviolability of human life', deals with abortion and euthanasia, issues which many might regard as matters of personal morality, of individual choice. Besides that the Catholic Church's teaching on these issues is well known. So one wonders what it was that required them to be considered again in an encyclical in the mid 1990s. Three new or developing realities were seen as demanding fresh reflection on the question of life: firstly, fresh

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threats to human life still to be born or in its final stages because of scientific and technological progress; secondly, a new cultural climate taking hold which involves a new way of considering life and relationships; and thirdly, actions which up to very recently would have been condemned by all religious teachers and rejected by the huge majority of people as crimes are coming to be accepted by more and more people not only as not criminal, not only as tolerable, but as things to which people are entitled, 'rights' for which public agencies ought to make provision (EV 4, 11, 18). EV understands itself therefore as a reflection on the kind of society and culture that is emerging in the developed world, specifically on the values that increasingly guide that society and culture.

If EV is not a social encyclical in the line from *Rerum Novarum* to *Centesimus Annus*, and does not present itself as such, neither is it a simple moral exhortation about people's private lives. The particular norms it re-affirms are well known but are considered by EV to involve questions of justice and human rights, poverty and power, voicelessness and domination, freedom and truth. The particular issues EV considers touch on those values which modern society professes to hold as fundamental. They certainly involve central concerns of the Christian gospel.

Critiques of Contemporary Culture

Much of the cultural critique of EV is what one would expect from a moral or religious teacher, warnings against hedonism, irresponsibility in sexual matters, self-centredness, the war of the powerful against the weak—things against which people need to be warned in every generation lest our life together become ever more nasty and brutish. But other aspects of the critique represent an attempt to identify problems specific to this age and time, things which are happening now which give to the dominant culture of the moment a distinctive and, in the eyes of the encyclical, a dangerous flavour. Such are things like individualism, consumerism, a culture of efficiency and success, an inability to integrate suffering within human experience, the danger of democracy becoming totalitarian.

In criticising contemporary culture for its individualism as well as its instrumental or technical understanding of human reason, and in sounding a warning about the ways in which democratic institutions are developing, John Paul II is by no means alone. There are, of course, difficulties in critiquing one's own place in history. From what vantage point within history can history be viewed? With what facilities does one engage in self-criticism? It is good to remember such questions even

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while attempting to engage in a critique of where we are[2].

Alasdair Macintyre has been an eloquent representative of this kind of critique of contemporary culture, sharing with EV concerns about individualism and fragmentation, about the loss of a sense of community and tradition, about a technical or commercial understanding of moral action, about the fact that democratic governments seem more and more to become simply value-neutral referees between competing interests. MacIntyre developed the critique expounded in *After Virtue* (1981) in two further works, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988) and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990). The striking concluding lines of *After Virtue* are read by some as a pessimistic diagnosis about the condition of contemporary culture, by others as an optimistic prognosis, an expression of hope in the capacity of human beings to recover more humane ways of living together:

> What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St Benedict[3].

Agreement with the general tone of MacIntyre's critique of individualism and rational autonomy echo from a number of perspectives: feminist ethics[4], social analysis[5], philosophical anthropology[6] and moral theology[7], to name a few at random.

Charles Taylor shares some of the concerns already mentioned about central values of contemporary culture—individualism, instrumental reason and particularly the danger of democracy becoming a kind of 'soft despotism'. For the latter he is indebted to the prophetic analysis of Alexis de Tocqueville. Taylor writes:

> A society in which people end up as the kind of individuals who are 'enclosed in their own hearts' is one where few will want to participate actively in self-government. They will prefer to stay at home and enjoy the satisfactions of private life, as long as the government of the day produces the means to these satisfactions and distributes them widely. This opens the danger of a new, specifically modern form of despotism, which Tocqueville calls 'soft' despotism. It will not be a tyranny of terror and oppression as in the old days. The government

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will be mild and paternalistic. It may even keep democratic forms, with periodic elections. But in fact, everything will be run by an 'immense tutelary power', over which people will have little control. The only defence against this, Tocqueville thinks, is a vigorous political culture in which participation is valued, at several levels of government and in voluntary associations as well. But the atomism of the self-absorbed individual militates against this. Once participation declines, once the lateral associations that were its vehicles wither away, the individual citizen is left alone in the face of the vast bureaucratic state and feels, correctly, powerless. This demotivates the citizen even further, and the vicious cycle of soft despotism is joined[8].

Nevertheless Taylor seems more optimistic than MacIntyre about the capacity of reason to engage fruitfully with the values of modernity. In relation to critiques of modernity Taylor says he is neither a knocker nor a booster, nor is he proposing a compromise. He is arguing, he says, for another basis altogether, that what is involved in values such as 'authenticity', 'instrumental reason' and 'democratic institutions' be thought through consistently and that those who champion these values be reminded of what they involve at their best.

The values of modern culture, Taylor argues, may be redeemed by being asked to be true to their own deepest tendencies. In any case—as Kolakowski suggests in the pages already cited—it can only be as participants in modern culture that we engage in the critique of it. Where else can we stand? We cannot pretend we do not live after Kant, Darwin, Marx and Freud. And in any case most people do value what is of value in individualism, authenticity, the achievements of technological reason, and the freedoms of democratic government. Who even among the critics of democracy would want to live now in anything but a democratic state, Churchill's 'least worst form of government'?

Civil Law and Moral Law—Where is Democracy Going?

A long section of EV is devoted to the relationship between the civil law and the moral law. The peculiarly modern question of the privacy of morality is considered. At the same time as there is a tendency to set down clearly the boundaries beyond which the state ought not to interfere in the private behaviour of its citizens there is a contrary tendency to look to the state to provide services as rights and entitlements for those citizens who choose to behave in certain (private?) ways. Democracy becomes 'procedural', therefore, and value-neutral as far as possible. It does not belong to the state to choose between moral opinions or to impose one opinion. In practice this often

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involves swinging from legal arrangements abhorrent to one section of the population to legal arrangements abhorrent to another. If it is always and everywhere a matter of the majority deciding, then there is no 'objective' order of values.

John Paul's critique of democracy as it tends to operate in practice caused some reaction at the time of EV's publication. His argument is that democracy is not a substitute for morality but that democracy itself must be subject to the moral law, an objective moral law, something like a 'natural' law. This is not in the first place because the Catholic Church wants to run the world but because the values espoused by democracy—dignity, human rights, the common good—are themselves based not on majority opinion but on some objective moral law. If democracy is not founded on the dignity of the individual and on the solidarity of human communities then it becomes empty.

Democracy undermines itself and the human rights tradition is inconsistent where absolutely equal respect is not accorded to every innocent human being. Such respect is the basis of all social relationships, of truth and justice, the person being respected as an end always and never as an object to be used or a means to some further end (EV 57). Some understandings of freedom in modern culture effectively distort life in society, the Pope argues. Where democracy, founded on the dignity of the human person, decides to act against the dignity of some then true freedom has died. To act against some members of a society on behalf of others destroys democracy whose moral basis obliges the state to protect against abuses of conscience and freedom, not to promote such abuses (EV 57). Where everything is negotiable and open to bargaining there is the danger that democracy begins to move towards totalitarianism (EV 18, 20).

If personal dignity is made equivalent to the capacity to communicate, John Paul continues, then there is no room for the weak and dependent. Freedom without solidarity will exalt the individual but will inevitably become the freedom of the strong against the weak. This is not how it ought to be since we are entrusted to one another as each other's keepers. Human freedom possesses an inherently relational dimension just as it is inherently linked with moral truth (EV 19 referring to *Veritatis Splendor*).

Against this, people might argue that modern culture and society does have a vision of the relationship between civil law and moral law which unfortunately does not happen to coincide with the one the Pope would like to see. From Nuremberg to Pinochet the western democratic world has struggled to establish some means whereby the morality which people sense to be inherent in democracy might be translated

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into effective legal practice. The declarations on human rights which have gained the support of so many sovereign states are surely among the greatest moral achievements of the twentieth century. The issues of abortion and euthanasia are perceived by the Pope as threats to those achievements, not least because they are actions taken by people who have power and have a voice, against other human individuals who have no power and no voice. (The extent to which the human rights tradition is actually the fruit of Jewish and Christian theology is an important question which can only be noted here in passing[9].)

Another Kind of Community

We have seen how Alasdair MacIntyre concludes his critique of modern culture by looking for the appearance of another St Benedict. Clearly he believes that civility and morality will continue, for the moment, in smaller communities of virtue. Charles Taylor believes there is point still to engaging with modernity and with the institutions of democratic government. He writes:

> What our situation seems to call for is a complex, many-levelled struggle, intellectual, spiritual, and political, in which the debates in the public arena interlink with those in a host of institutional settings, like hospitals and schools, where the issues of enframing technology are being lived through in concrete form; and where these disputes in turn both feed and are fed by the various attempts to define in theoretical terms the place of technology and the demands of authenticity, and beyond that, the shape of human life and its relation to the cosmos[10].

For EV the way forward is through the creation of a society in which people's way of relating will be inspired by solidarity, community, involvement and commitment. EV paints a picture of an alternative social arrangement, a different kind of community, a culture which is based not on the values that prevail at present but that lives by what seem like more ancient yet more humane values, those of solidarity, concern for the neighbour, a radically different evaluation of what makes for 'successful living'. In such a community consumerism and utilitarianism will be replaced by justice and charity, the importance of having by the value of being, persons will be more important than things, efficiency and technical prowess will remain subject to the requirements of human dignity, individualism will be complemented if not replaced entirely by solidarity (EV 19).

'Solidarity' is a favourite term with John Paul II, rich in historical resonance for the Polish Pope. It has become his preferred term for

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charity or love, the central moral reality of Christian life. He develops this theme at length in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* where solidarity is understood as a moral and social attitude, a virtue, a commitment to the common good, a gospel attitude, a virtue which highlights the difference between having and being. The evil structures of sin in the world will only be overcome by human and Christian solidarity (SRS 40, 46) which involve charity, forgiveness, generosity and reconciliation and which promote a unity among human beings that reflects the communion of God's Trinitarian life (SRS 28, 38). John Paul speaks of

> the urgent need to change the spiritual attitudes which define each individual's relationship with self, with neighbour, with even the remotest human communities, and with nature itself (SRS 38).

Respect for life is part of loving my neighbour (EV 40ff), a moral teaching of the Old Testament which is radicalised and universalised by Jesus since it is not just my brother or my neighbour whom I must love but the stranger and the enemy too. The Pope stresses the importance of persons being recognised (SRS 39), a theme which Charles Taylor takes up from Hegel and develops at length[11].

In his important study of the relations between paganism and Christianity in the second and third centuries—a study which seems to take on fresh relevance when one compares the concerns of that period with those of our own—E.R.Dodds bears unprejudiced witness to the importance of the Christian virtue of solidarity for the eventual over-powering of paganism by Christianity. 'Christians', he writes, 'were in a more than formal sense 'members one of another': I think that was a major cause, perhaps the strongest single cause, of the spread of Christianity'[12]. He supports this comment with a quotation from A.-J. Festugière who, speaking also of Christian charity or solidarity, writes:

> S'il n'y avait eu cela, le monde serait encore païen. Et le jour où il n'y aura plus cela, le monde redeviendra païen[13].

In a word the alternative community envisaged by EV is, it seems, 'the Church' in its biblical and theological reality. In some ways these positive sections of EV might be understood as a kind of charter for a 'counter-cultural' ecclesiology and many people have taken them in that sense. But EV's analysis of contemporary culture and society is not totally negative, pointing as it does to many positive signs of hope at work in humanity's present situation (EV 26-27)[14].

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Towards Theology

In the end the analysis offered by EV is theological, not surprising in a document of its kind. Kolakowski, considering some of the worries of the philosophy of religion, had already written that 'a perspective from which the meaning of history can be seen must be able to embrace the entire process', that its 'vantage point coincides with the divine eye' and that 'the question of meaning ... is void and illegitimate unless a channel is open to us whereby we can make contact with the eternal repository of meanings'[15].

For EV hope for humanity is founded ultimately in the sprinkled blood of Jesus, the most eloquent and powerful sign that the vocation of the human being is to the sincere gift of self. The Church offers the world 'the gospel of life', what we might call a 'high anthropology', where life and freedom and truth are all contained within the human being's vocation to love. Women and men are great to the extent that they live up to this call to be like God (EV 25).

To a philosophical reflection on the current situation, then, theology will add something about God and something about sin. 'At the heart of every culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God', says John Paul II (EV 96, quoting *Centesimus Annus*). Where the sense of God is eclipsed the sense of human dignity is eclipsed also because where God is denied the dignity of the human person and the inviolability of human life also end up being rejected or compromised. A series of losses follow on the sin of Cain: loss of a sense of God, of a sense of the human being as transcendent, of a sense of life as gift of God, of a sense of life as something sacred, of a sense of life as something not only to be cared for but to be venerated (EV 21, 96).

The 'gospel of life', a renewed sense of life as a gift of God to human beings, must be preached, celebrated and served by the Church. EV continues with much practical advice about the many ways in which this three-fold task, mirroring that of Christ as prophet, priest and king, may be undertaken by individuals and communities (EV, chapter four). The question is an urgent one: how is the Church to be inserted into the world, to engage with contemporary culture, to preach its essential moral message in such a way that it will find a hearing? Losing its former institutional hold in the various forms of Christian society, new challenges emerge for the Church which cannot be simply 'counter-cultural' but must endeavour always to incarnate its message in the values, laws and virtues of human communities[16].

The Church's interest is not theocracy but the promotion of 'a human state' (EV 101). Nevertheless its message is not simply a political or philosophical one. Human reality is interpreted also in the light of the

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gospel and of the Church's tradition of faith for which human life is both earthly and transcendent. The Church's social teaching is not one more ideology but a moral and theological understanding of human relationships in this world. 'The revelation of the Gospel of life is given to us', the Pope concludes, 'as a good to be shared with all people: so that all men and women may have fellowship with us and with the Trinity' (EV 101).

1 I am grateful to those who took part in the 1998 autumn seminar at the Dominican House of Studies, Tallaght, and to the community of Saint Dominic's Priory, London, who listened to earlier versions of this paper and helped to improve it in the discussions that followed.
2 On this point see Leszek Kolakowski's reflections on 'The Sacred and Death' in *Religion* (Fontana Masterguides, 1982) pp.152-160.
3 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (London 1981), p.245.
4 Susan Parsons, 'Feminist ethics', in Bernard Hoose, ed., *Christian Ethics. An Introduction* (London 1998), pp.135-148.
5 Timothy J.Gorringe, 'Property', in Hoose, op.cit., pp.173–185.
6 Joseph Selling, 'The human person', in Hoose, op.cit., pp.95–109
7 Of the works of Stanley Hauerwas, for example, note especially *Vision and Virtue* (1974), *A Community of Character* (1981) and *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1983).
8 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1991), pp.9-10.
9 See for example Michael J.Perry, 'Religion, Politics and Human Rights', in Bernard Treacy OP and Gerry Whyte, editors, *Religion, Morality and Public Policy* (Dominican Publications, Dublin, 1995), pp.16-41.
10 *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p.120.
11 See most recently Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition.* Edited and introduced by Amy Gutmann, with contributions by K.Anthony Appiah, Jürgen Habermas, Steven C.Rockefeller, Michael Walzer and Susan Wolf (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1994).
12 E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety. Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (New York and London, 1965), p.138.
13 Dodds, op.cit., p.138, n.1.
14 One of these signs of hope is 'growing public opposition to the death penalty' (EV 27). *Evangelium Vitae* itself seems to mark an advance in Catholic thinking about capital punishment: EV 56.
15 Leszek Kolakowski, op.cit., p.155.
16 Paul VI stressed that the modern world needs witnesses more than it needs preachers or teachers (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975). The credibility of the Church's social and political message is connected with the way the Church runs its own affairs: see now Paul Vallely, *The New Politics: Catholic Social Teaching for the Twenty-First Century* (SCM Press, London, 1998).

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