

# Culture in the Magisterium<sup>1</sup> of Pope John Paul II: Evangelization through Dialogue and the Renewal of Society

R. Jared Staudt  
Augustine Institute

*George Weigel, in his Cube and the Cathedral, argues that the Slavic view of history, which is centered on the role of culture, provides a true understanding of what moves peoples and societies at the deepest level. This explains the power of John Paul II to reawaken the consciousness of his fellow countrymen and women in one of the greatest peaceful achievements of freedom in history. John Paul understood the fundamental role of culture and so created the Pontifical Council for Culture. In a series of annual lectures to this Council, John Paul laid out a vision for how culture must be the “priority” of the New Evangelization. He laid out a number of reasons for this. First, faith is*

*incomplete if it is not lived out in a culture, and a culture opposed to the faith creates obstacles to the living out of that faith. Second, culture provides a medium for dialogue between believers and nonbelievers. Art also serves as such a medium. Third, the goal of the engagement of culture in the New Evangelization is the building of a civilization of love, one that enables the human person to live freely in the truth. Finally, this transformation of culture will begin when holiness and culture are brought together. A transformed culture that is more informed by Christianity is one of the key goals of John Paul’s call for a New Evangelization. This transformed culture would also be more genuinely human, would offer more freedom, in that it centers on true dignity of the human person. This vision is also fundamentally rooted in the call of Vatican II to reawaken the laity to their particular mission in working for the good of the world.*

Pope John Paul II called the church to devote its efforts to a New Evangelization aimed primarily toward those Christians who have fallen away from the practice of the faith. What is not as well known is that he sought to place culture at the center of the church’s efforts in the New Evangelization. The background of his own life, the great upheavals he experienced in Poland, taught him the foundational importance of culture for human life. His Pontificate proved this theory correct, once again in relation to his homeland, as his message shook the global political structure, ending the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> Officially, John Paul’s focus

2. George Weigel describes John Paul’s own understanding of the collapse of Soviet Communism, as given in *Centesimus Annus*: “John Paul argued that ‘1989’ could not be understood through the conventional analytic categories of Realpolitik. Rather, ‘1989’ was made possible by a prior moral and cultural revolution, which created the

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1. “Magisterium” refers to the teaching authority of the Catholic Church vested in the pope and bishops. I use the term here because this article explores only those documents written by John Paul II in relation to culture that fall within his ministry as bishop and pope.

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Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture, Vol. 3, No. 1 (March 2014)  
52–65 © 2014

on the importance of culture can be seen in his creation of the Pontifical Council for Culture (PCC). John Paul also emphasized the vital role of culture in the church's mission of evangelization throughout his magisterial writing. In this respect, he continued the vision of the Second Vatican Council, which emphasized the importance of culture in *Gaudium et Spes* and called Christians to dynamically engage the modern world.

In a series of annual lectures to the PCC, John Paul advanced a vision for how culture is the “priority” of the New Evangelization.<sup>3</sup> He laid out a number of reasons for this prioritization. First, faith and culture stand in a reciprocal relation in which the two require each other if they are to flourish. Thus, as seen in the modern context, a culture opposed to faith creates obstacles to the living out of that faith. Second, culture provides a medium of dialogue between believers and nonbelievers. This dialogue takes a more specific form in art. Third, the renewal of culture requires all people of good will to cooperate in building a new civilization of love. This transformed culture, while stemming from the transformative power of the gospel, would also be more genuinely human in that it takes as its center the true dignity of the human person. Fourth, this cultural change will begin only when Christians are transformed by the holiness of Christ. Following from

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conditions for the possibility of nonviolent political upheaval that swept Marxism-Leninism into the dustbin of European history.” “John Paul II and the Priority of Culture,” *First Things* (1998): 19. Weigel describes further that “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” (Ibid.).

3. “Your vocation, in this turn of the century and of the millennium, is that of creating a new culture of love and of hope inspired by the truth that frees us in Christ Jesus. This is the goal of inculturation, this is the priority for the new evangelization.” “Letting the Gospel Take Root in Every Culture” (January 10, 1992), n. 10.

these points, this article will explore the central role of culture in John Paul's magisterial teaching.<sup>4</sup>

Before directly engaging John Paul's thoughts on culture, I will first give some general background on how culture functioned in his life more broadly. George Weigel, in his *Cube and the Cathedral*, argued that the Slavic view of history, which is centered on the role of culture, provides the true understanding of what moves peoples and societies at the deepest level. Weigel describes:

in this way of thinking, history is not simply the by-product of the context for power in the world. . . . Rather, history is driven, over the long haul, by culture—by what men and women honor, cherish, and worship; by what societies deem to be true and good and noble; by the expression they give to those convictions in language, literature and the arts; by what individuals are willing to stake their lives on.<sup>5</sup>

This is the view of history in which Karol Wojtyła, the future Pope John Paul II, was formed. It was the power of culture that enabled Poland to survive over a hundred years of political nonexistence, its partitions, and then two brutal invasions and occupations in the twentieth century. Avery Cardinal Dulles, who spoke of John Paul as a “theologian of culture,” likewise pointed to his Polish heritage as a key factor in his awareness of the power of culture:

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4. The second president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, Paul Cardinal Poupard, provides an excellent overview of the church's teaching on and mission toward culture, including the Pontificate of John Paul II. See Paul Cardinal Poupard, *The Church and Culture: Challenge and Confrontation: Inculturation and Evangelization*, ed., John H. Miller, C.S.C. (St. Louis: Central Bureau, CCVA, 1994).

5. George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics without God* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 30.

From his early years Karol Wojtyła, as a poet, dramatist, and philosophy professor in a Communist country with a deeply rooted Catholic heritage, developed a keen interest in the relations between faith and culture. As a young man he wrote poems and plays, using literature and drama as ways of sustaining the national culture and faith traditions of his people under the brutalities of the Nazi occupation and the oppressive heel of Soviet Marxism.<sup>6</sup>

John Paul was deeply formed in his own culture, by which he learned the key role of culture in human life more broadly. He has testified that Poland “has kept its identity, and it has kept, in spite of partitions and foreign occupations, its national sovereignty, not by relying on the resources of physical power, but solely *by relying on its culture*. This culture turned out in the circumstances to be more powerful than all other forces.”<sup>7</sup> He recognized the power of culture in his homeland and therefore saw culture as key to the life of Christianity, an essential means by which the faith needs to be supported and lived out.

John Paul felt so strongly about culture that he went as far as to affirm, “yes, the future of man depends on the culture.”<sup>8</sup> Culture in many ways is behind the crisis of faith today: “The spiritual void that threatens society is above all a cultural void and it is the moral

conscience, renewed by the Gospel of Christ, which can truly fill it.”<sup>9</sup> Culture can also be part of the solution to that crisis. It is precisely a renewal of faith and the resultant moral strengthening that will transform culture, a transformation that begins with the renewal of the Christian soul and organically spreads out into society from the family and through personal relationships. In what follows, I will present John Paul’s vision for culture’s crucial role in the New Evangelization. As much as possible, I will let John Paul speak in his own words.

### Faith and Culture

Before speaking of the relation between faith and culture, it is important to define culture. John Paul defines culture simply “as the specific way of human existence” and as that which “determin[es] the inter-human and social character of human existence.”<sup>10</sup> We could say broadly that culture is a shared way of life. With this general definition, we can see culture acting both on a small scale, as in the family and local community, and on a large scale, in relation to a nation or even globally. It is tempting to equate culture with the products that are cultivated within the culture. There is truth to this, as we can see the origins of culture in God’s command at creation to be fruitful and to subdue the earth. Cultivating the world responds to this command by shaping the goods of the earth and bringing them to perfection. John Paul, just before the beginning of his papacy, lectured at the University of Milan on “The Problem of the Constitution of Culture through Human Praxis.” In this lecture, he made the point that culture truly centers on the human person. Culture is more rooted in the action of the

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9. “Letting the Gospel Take Root in Every Culture,” n. 3.

10. *Ibid.*, n. 6.

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6. Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., *The Splendor of Faith: The Theological Vision of Pope John Paul II* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Co., 2003), 153. This quote comes from a chapter of the book entitled “Theology of Culture,” which was originally published as a journal article with the title “John Paul II as a Theologian of Culture” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 1 (1997): 19–32.

7. Pope John Paul II, “Address to UNESCO: Man’s Entire Humanity is Expressed in Culture,” (June 2, 1980), n. 14. All references will be to the works of Pope John Paul II unless otherwise stated.

8. *Ibid.*, n. 23.

human person than in what is produced: “Culture (in the authentic and full sense of the word) is constituted through human praxis to the extent that through it people become more human, and not merely acquire more means.”<sup>11</sup> The deepest aspect of culture is the opportunity for the human person to act in a human way, to fulfill the human need to express oneself creatively in the world.<sup>12</sup>

Though the church is not itself a culture, it exists in the world of culture and is both influenced by it and formative of it. John Paul says very strongly that Christianity must exercise this task of forming culture: “Christianity is a creator of culture in its very foundation.”<sup>13</sup> Faith is not meant to be something private and individual but must create a culture, that is, it must inform the way a Christian lives in relation to others. Without a way of life to express it, there would be something deficient in a Christian’s faith: “The synthesis between culture and faith is not only a demand of culture, but also of faith. . . . A faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived.”<sup>14</sup> John Paul’s point about the need for faith to become a way of life stands at the foundation of culture’s role in evangelization.

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11. Karol Wojtyła, “The Problem of the Constitution of Culture through Human Praxis,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok, O.S.M. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 268.

12. Speaking to UNESCO, John Paul articulates the necessity of culture for human life: “The essential meaning of culture consists, according to the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, in the fact that it is a characteristic of human life as such. *Man lives a really human life thanks to culture*. Human life is culture in this sense too that, through it, man is distinguished and differentiated from everything that exists elsewhere in the visible world: man cannot do without culture” (n. 6).

13. *Ibid.*, n. 10.

14. “Address to the Italian National Congress of the Ecclesial Movement for Cultural Commitment” (January 16, 1982).

It is not enough to preach a message of truth. There must also be public action to live out that message.

The process by which faith becomes a culture has been understood generally in terms of inculturation. John Paul describes this process as follows: “When the Church enters into contact with cultures, she must welcome all that is compatible with the Gospel in these traditions of the peoples, in order to bring the riches of Christ to them and to be enriched herself by the manifold wisdom of the nations of the earth.”<sup>15</sup> Although the concept of inculturation is generally used in terms of the missions today, it also can express the general synthesis of faith and culture that has occurred throughout history: “The Church has been greatly enriched by acquisitions from so many civilizations.”<sup>16</sup> The power of inculturation ultimately lies not in the faith imposing itself on an already existing culture but in the faith enabling the natural world to be itself in a higher way: “Faith frees thought and opens new horizons to the language of poetry and literature, to philosophy, to theology, and to other forms of creativity proper to the human genius.”<sup>17</sup> Christian culture liberates the goods of the earth and human life and orders them to God.

If faith has such an important role in culture, then it is not only because culture is a means of living out and expressing faith but also because culture in many ways defines how Christians live their faith. A Christian culture would support the living of the faith, but a culture that opposes Christianity would become an obstacle to

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15. “A Fresh Approach to Evangelizing Peoples and Cultures” (January 17, 1987), n. 5.

16. “The Church and Culture” (January 13, 1983), n. 6.

17. “The New PCC’s Tasks: Dialogue with Non-Believers and the Inculturation of Faith” (March 18, 1994), n. 9.

faith. John Paul lays out this principle: “The cultural atmosphere in which a human being lives has a great influence upon his or her way of thinking and, thus, of acting. Therefore, a division between faith and culture is more than a small impediment to evangelization, while a culture penetrated with the Christian spirit is an instrument that favors the spreading of the Good News.”<sup>18</sup> From this point, it is a small step to the conclusion that our contemporary culture imposes many obstacles to the faith:

Handing on the Gospel message in today’s world is particularly arduous, mainly because our contemporaries are immersed in cultural contexts that are often alien to an inner spiritual dimension, in situations in which a materialist outlook prevails. One cannot escape the fact that, more than in any other historical period, there is a breakdown in the process of handing on moral and religious values between generations. This leads to a kind of incongruity between the Church and the contemporary world.<sup>19</sup>

Pope Paul VI aptly described this cultural situation in a quote that John Paul referenced many times: “the rupture between the Gospel and culture is ‘without a doubt the drama of our time.’”<sup>20</sup> In this rupture, “Christianity seems absent from social life and faith is relegated to the private sphere”; thus life has become “secularized under pressure from the models of thought and action spread by the prevailing culture. The absence of a culture to support them

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18. *Sapientia Christiana* (1979), foreword.

19. “Handing on Faith at the Heart of Cultures” (March 16, 2002), n. 2.

20. “The Gospel Is Good News for Cultures” (March 14, 1997), n. 2, quoting *Evangeli nuntiandi*, n. 20.

prevents the young from living it to the full.”<sup>21</sup> The crisis of faith in the world today largely stems from a crisis of culture, from a way of life that is opposed to the gospel and that draws Christians away from practicing their faith.

John Paul famously described the current state of our culture, in *Evangelium Vitae*, as a “culture of death, or what he even calls an “anti-culture.”<sup>22</sup> He vividly describes this culture:

But man is also threatened in his biological being by the irreparable deterioration of the environment, by the risk of genetic manipulations, attacks against unborn life and by torture, which is currently still seriously widespread. Our love for man must give us the courage to denounce ideas which reduce the human being to a thing that one can manipulate, humiliate, or arbitrarily eliminate. Man is also insidiously threatened in his moral being, because he is subject to hedonistic currents which exacerbate his instincts and fascinate him with illusions of consumption without discrimination.<sup>23</sup>

John Paul recognizes that both direct threats to human life and threats to the moral being of the person lead to a culture of death. Culture is meant to promote human flourishing but now has become an obstacle to a fulfilled human life. The fight for Christian culture has become a fight for life itself. Turning away from God and focusing instead on the human has not lead to a liberation of culture but rather to the instrumentalization of human life.

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21. Ibid.

22. “The PCC’s Work Now and Plans for the Future” (January 16, 1984), n. 8.

23. “The Church and Culture,” n. 8.

While John Paul affirms that “culture is of man, by man, and for man,” culture must be ordered around human dignity.<sup>24</sup> Culture must serve humanity; it must be a culture of life, ordered toward protecting and serving life and enabling it to flourish.

### Dialogue and Art

The reason culture must serve humanity is that it flows from human nature and is ordered toward its fulfillment. John Paul roots his vision of culture in Christian humanism. Evangelization is not meant to take away from the integrity of human nature or the genuine aspirations of people living in the world today but precisely to fulfill them. John Paul makes this clear:

It is essential to affirm man for himself, and not for any other motive or reason: uniquely for himself! Moreover, it is necessary to love man because he is man, it is necessary to demand love for man because of the particular dignity that he possesses. These affirmations concerning man belong to the very substance of Christ’s message and of the mission of the Church, despite everything that critics have been able to declare on the matter.<sup>25</sup>

This position elicits criticism both from secular thinkers and even from some Christians. That Christ came precisely to affirm the goodness of humanity is seen by some to take away from Christ’s own uniqueness. On the other hand, John Paul’s Christian humanism demonstrates that Christ is for man, a point he

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24. “Letting the Gospel Take Root in Every Culture,” n. 10.

25. “Address to UNESCO,” n. 10.

insisted upon in the drafting of *Gaudium et Spes*. This document, under Cardinal Wojtyła’s guidance, affirms that Christ “fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”<sup>26</sup> Christ comes to each person precisely to liberate that person in order that he or she may be more human and may live a life that is at once more fulfilled on the human level and in this fulfillment is dedicated to the glory of God.

John Paul’s answer to the crisis of culture today is not one of condemnation or retreat. Rather, he asks Christians to enter into a dialogue with modern culture, an approach that appreciates and centers on the dignity of the human person. This approach, he says, stems from Vatican II: “Therefore, it is in the name of the Christian faith that the Second Vatican Council committed the whole Church to listen to modern man in order to understand him and to invent a new kind of dialogue which would permit the originality of the Gospel message to be carried to the heart of contemporary mentalities.”<sup>27</sup> Evangelization is not an imposition of faith. If difficulties to the acceptance of the gospel exist in our culture, then there must be understanding and even sympathy in order to overcome them. The gospel must be presented in a way that meets the needs, expectations, and challenges of the current age.

John Paul feels so strongly about the importance of dialogue that he calls it a:

“duty that is incumbent upon all to listen carefully to modern man, not in order to approve all of his behavior, but

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26. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), n. 22.

27. “The Church and Culture,” n. 3.

rather in order to discover first of all his latent hopes and aspirations.” This is why I have invited . . . all men of faith and of culture to commit themselves with conviction to a dialogue among cultures, bringing to this dialogue the salvific word of the Gospel.<sup>28</sup>

Dialogue is meant to be a tool of evangelization so that the gospel is presented within the context of a conversation, one that takes seriously the thoughts and feelings of people in our current cultural context. The church can no longer presume to have an immediate audience for its message but must seek out and dialogue with those with whom it would like to share the word of God.

The dialogue is not just with the individual. Effective dialogue must be cognizant of the culture informing the dialogue partner. If the church’s message is to take root in contemporary culture, then it will be greatly assisted by familiarity with that culture, by understanding not only the context of the modern world but also how to present its message in a way that directs it toward the culture. This give and take—receiving from the culture and speaking to it—is expressed by John Paul as follows:

It is required that the evangelizer familiarize himself with the sociocultural environments in which he must announce the word of God; more important, the Gospel is itself a leavening agent for culture to the extent that it reaches man in his manner of thinking, behaving, working, enjoying himself, that is, as it reaches him in his cultural specificity. On the other hand, our faith gives us confidence in man—in man created in the image of God and redeemed

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28. *Ibid.*, n. 5.

by Christ—in man whom we want to defend and to love for himself, conscious as we are that he is man only because of his culture, that is, because of his freedom to grow integrally and with all of his specific abilities.<sup>29</sup>

To dialogue with the individual and groups within the context of culture gives a fuller picture of the human person and the context in which they are shaped and in which they express themselves. The dialogue will miss a central aspect of the human person if it fails to attend to the fact that culture is the context of human development.

Cultural dialogue is aided by one particular expression of culture: art, which is a particularly potent means of expressing the deepest elements of the human soul. In his “Letter to Artists,” John Paul specifically sought to enter into a dialogue with the modern world through a dialogue with artists:

I intend to follow the path of the fruitful dialogue between the Church and artists which has gone on unbroken through two thousand years of history, and which still, at the threshold of the Third Millennium, offers rich promise for the future. In fact, this dialogue is not dictated merely by historical accident or practical need, but is rooted in the very essence of both religious experience and artistic creativity. The opening page of the Bible presents God as a kind of exemplar of everyone who produces a work: the human craftsman mirrors the image of God as Creator.<sup>30</sup>

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29. *Ibid.*, n. 10.

30. “Letter to Artists” (1999), n. 1.

The nature of art itself is a kind of dialogue between the craftsman and the Creator that goes to the heart of culture; it is a creative expression of the soul, which takes up and cultivates the original goods of the earth established by the Creator.

This quality makes art a particularly powerful means of dialogue in which the church can present its faith in poetic and artistic forms and the modern artist can poignantly express his or her aspirations and have them appreciated. Art is the means of expressing the soul of a culture, and therefore the church must meet the culture in this medium. Art provides, in a way, a common ground between the church and culture:

Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience. In so far as it seeks the beautiful, fruit of an imagination which rises above the everyday, art is by its nature a kind of appeal to the mystery. Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.<sup>31</sup>

The artist expresses the deepest longings of the human soul. The church would like to meet these longings, but to do so it must engage these artistic expressions and renew its own artistic and cultural efforts. John Paul expresses his desire for this dialogue to initiate a new spirit of cooperation between the church and artists, which could fulfill both the spiritual aspirations of the artist and the church's need to express her faith to the world: "From such

cooperation the Church hopes for a renewed 'epiphany' of beauty in our time and apt responses to the particular needs of the Christian community."<sup>32</sup> Not only could this cooperation meet the needs of the Christian community, but it can also renew the church's efforts at dialogue and evangelization in the modern world.

### The Renewal of Culture

The goal of entering into dialogue is not to leave the dialogue partner in his or her current state but to propose the gospel message in such a way that it will take root in his or her life as well as in modern culture. The goal of dialogue is to work toward a renewed culture, a way of life that at once meets the needs of the modern world and embodies the truth of the gospel. Therefore, it is not a return to a past way of life but a new construction implemented by Christians working with all people of good will.<sup>33</sup> The goal of building a new culture further reveals that the object of evangelization is not simply individuals but society more broadly:

For this reason, the Church of Christ strives to bring the Good News to every sector of humanity so as to be able to convert the consciences of human beings, both individually

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32. Ibid.

33. Vatican II's Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, provides helpful details on the nature of the Catholic Church's cooperation with those from other religions: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women. . . . The Church, therefore, urges its sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture" (n. 2).

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31. Ibid., n. 10.



and collectively, and to fill with the light of the Gospel their works and undertakings, their entire lives, and, indeed, the whole of the social environment in which they are engaged. In this way the Church carries out her mission of evangelizing also by advancing human culture.<sup>34</sup>

In creating a new culture, the church advances one aspect of its mission. Vatican II affirms that although the church's mission finds its fulfillment primarily in the work of salvation, this mission extends also to the transformation of the world.<sup>35</sup> The church finds itself at the service of all humanity, cooperating with it to instill genuine human values in culture: "Be convinced of this: the strength of the gospel is capable of transforming the cultures of our times by its leaven of justice and of charity in truth and solidarity. Faith which becomes culture is the source of hope."<sup>36</sup> In the

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34. *Sapientia Christiana*, foreword.

35. See *Apostolicam Actuositatem*: "Christ's redemptive work, while essentially concerned with the salvation of men, includes also the renewal of the whole temporal order. Hence the mission of the Church is not only to bring the message and grace of Christ to men but also to penetrate and perfect the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel. In fulfilling this mission of the Church, the Christian laity exercise their apostolate both in the Church and in the world, in both the spiritual and the temporal orders" (November 18, 1965), n. 5. The effects of the church's mission can be seen specifically in relation to culture: "Thus the Church, in the very fulfillment of her own function, stimulates and advances human and civic culture" (*Gaudium et Spes*), n. 58.

36. "The World's Changing Cultural Horizons" (January 12, 1990), n. 7. John Paul emphasizes that the building of Catholic culture is for the good of all: "But at the heart of this disillusionment there remains a thirst for the absolute, a desire for goodness, a hunger for truth, a need for personal fulfillment. This shows the breadth of the Pontifical Council for Culture's task: to help the Church achieve a new synthesis of faith and culture for the greatest benefit of all. As this century draws to a close, it is essential to reaffirm the fruitfulness of faith for the development of a culture." "The Gospel is Good News for Cultures" (March 14, 1997), n. 3.

context of the current crisis of culture, the church has to work to build hope again. The gospel must reawaken the genuine desires of humanity, including the desire for freedom: "The world of today is rediscovering that, far from being the opium of the people, faith in Christ is the best guarantee and the stimulus of their liberty."<sup>37</sup> The work of evangelizing, rather than superseding genuine human desires, enlivens them and helps them to come to fruition.

Thus, the church's mission embraces all people and works for their good in its mission to transform the world. John Paul used a phrase to describe the kind of renewed society that he envisioned for the world: a civilization of love. He describes this civilization as follows: "The Church respects all cultures and imposes on no one her faith in Jesus Christ, but she invites all people of good will to promote a true civilization of love, founded on the evangelical values of brotherhood, justice, and dignity for all."<sup>38</sup> These values are genuinely Christian, but they also have a universal appeal that can enable all people to work for this civilization. Given the cultural situation, which, as has been stated, is characterized as a culture of death, John Paul proposes that a new culture of life be built that places the dignity of the human person at its center. This leads him to lay out one of his clearest expressions of how to build a new culture in *Evangelium Vitae*:

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37. "The World's Changing Cultural Horizons," n. 1.

38. "Evangelizing Today's Cultures" (January 15, 1985), n. 3. John Paul states elsewhere: "Love is like a great force hidden deep within cultures in order to urge them to overcome their incurable finiteness by opening themselves to him who is their Source and End, and to give them, when they do open themselves to his grace, enriching fullness" (Letter Establishing the Pontifical Council for Culture, May 20, 1982). For insights on how Catholics can work toward a civilization of love, see Carl Anderson, *A Civilization of Love: What Every Catholic Can Do to Transform the World* (New York: Harper One, 2008).

What is urgently called for is a general mobilization of consciences and a united ethical effort to activate a great campaign in support of life. All together, we must build a new culture of life: new, because it will be able to confront and solve today's unprecedented problems affecting human life; new, because it will be adopted with deeper and more dynamic conviction by all Christians; new, because it will be capable of bringing about a serious and courageous cultural dialogue among all parties. While the urgent need for such a cultural transformation is linked to the present historical situation, it is also rooted in the Church's mission of evangelization. The purpose of the Gospel, in fact, is "to transform humanity from within and to make it new" (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n.18). Like the yeast which leavens the whole measure of dough (cf. Mt 13:33), the Gospel is meant to permeate all cultures and give them life from within, so that they may express the full truth about the human person and about human life.<sup>39</sup>

Once again, the new culture that must be built is one of universal appeal that centers on the human person. It is precisely the gospel that has the purifying power to heal the wounds of the culture of death and the leaven to create a new culture.

The means by which this civilization will come about will not be primarily through the work of the hierarchy. Vatican II, especially in *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, entrusted the mission of

transforming the world specifically to the laity. John Paul makes this clear, speaking to the Pontifical Council for Culture:

I encourage you particularly to continue your efforts to involve the laity in this task, for it is they who are at the heart of the cultures which characterize modern society. If the Gospel of Christ is to become the ferment capable of purifying and enriching the cultural orientations which will decide the future of the human family, this largely depends on the laity.<sup>40</sup>

The lay faithful by their life in the world are meant to transform everything they do by bringing the spirit of the gospel to it. The gospel, thus, will begin to take form as a culture, as it informs all the activity of Christians and as these actions begin to transform all that they touch.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, it is the individual, daily actions of Christians that are the means of building Christian culture. John Paul articulates the progression from the gospel message, to words, to actions, and finally to a culture as follows: "We are all called to pass on this message by words which proclaim it, a life which witnesses to it, a culture which radiates it. For the Gospel brings culture to its perfection, and authentic culture is open to the Gospel."<sup>42</sup> It is certainly not likely that we are going to experience a predominantly Catholic

40. "A Fresh Approach to Evangelizing Peoples and Cultures," n. 6.

41. John Paul describes how the Christian must change: "In a word, we can say that the cultural change which we are calling for demands from everyone the courage to adopt a new life-style, consisting in making practical choices—at the personal, family, social and international level—on the basis of a correct scale of values: the primacy of being over having, of the person over things" (*Evangelium Vitae*, n. 98).

42. "The Gospel Is Good News for Cultures," n. 5.

39. *Evangelium Vitae* (March 25, 1995), n. 95. Paragraph 95 begins a new section of the encyclical, entitled "Walk as Children of Light' (Eph 5:8): Bringing about a Transformation of Culture."

culture, as was seen in the Middle Ages, anytime soon. What we might see, as John Paul indicates, is a culture that can be informed by and open to the gospel. This culture would be the effect of the gospel taking root in individual lives and family life and from there overflowing into the world at large.

### Holiness

If it is largely the case that culture will be renewed on account of individual action, uniting with others in family life and in local settings, then it is important to look at how living one's faith has the power to change culture. John Paul speaks of this as the renewal of culture beginning "in man's heart."<sup>43</sup> It is not simply one's own efforts that will enable the transformation of culture. Ultimately, this transformation must come through divine assistance. John Paul makes it very clear that what is needed to "achieve a synthesis between the Gospel and culture" can be found:

in striving to make . . . cultural efforts a way of holiness. Culture and holiness! We must not be afraid, when saying these two words, of pairing them unduly. On the contrary, these two dimensions, if well understood, meet at the

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43. *Centesimus Annus* (May 1, 1991), n. 51. The full quote reads: "All human activity takes place within a culture and interacts with culture. For an adequate formation of a culture, the involvement of the whole man is required, whereby he exercises his creativity, intelligence, and knowledge of the world and of people. Furthermore, he displays his capacity for self-control, personal sacrifice, solidarity and readiness to promote the common good. Thus the first and most important task is accomplished within man's heart. The way in which he is involved in building his own future depends on the understanding he has of himself and of his own destiny. It is on this level that *the Church's specific and decisive contribution to true culture* is to be found."

roots, they unite with naturalness on their journey, they join together in the final goal. *They meet at the roots!* Is God, the thrice Holy (cf. Is 6:3), not the source of all light for our intellect? Behind our every cultural achievement, if we go to the bottom of things, the mystery appears. Every created reality, in fact, points beyond itself to the One who is its ultimate source and foundation. Man, then, precisely when he is investigating and learning, recognizes his creaturely status, experiences an ever new wonder at the Creator's inexhaustible gifts and reaches out with his intellect and will to the infinite and the absolute. An authentic culture cannot fail to bear the mark of that healthy restlessness so wonderfully described by St Augustine in the beginning of his *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (*Conf.*, I, 1). Therefore, cultural commitment and spiritual commitment, far from excluding one another or from being in tension with each other, mutually sustain one other.<sup>44</sup>

In what may be his most compelling passage on culture, John Paul here defines the ultimate importance of culture. Culture has value for a Christian because it has both common roots and a common end with holiness. Both arise as a response to the Creator; both are fulfilled only by directing all good toward him. The work of culture is the perfection of the human being, the becoming more fully alive, which must point ultimately to God and find its fulfillment in God.

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44. "Address to the Catholic University of Sacred Heart" (November 9, 2000), ns. 2-4.

Taking this line of thought a step further, John Paul elucidates that true creative energy, the power behind the creation of culture, does not come ultimately from humanity itself. God's grace is the true origin of culture, and holiness, as seen in the saints, is its highest expression:

Grace awakens, frees, purifies, orders and expands the creative powers of man. While it invites asceticism and renunciation, it does so in order to free the heart, a freedom eminently conducive to artistic creation as well as to thought and action based on truth. In this culture, therefore, the influence of the saints is decisive: through the light that they emanate, through their inner freedom, through the power of their personality, they have made a mark on the artistic thought and expression of entire periods of our history.<sup>45</sup>

This passage makes even clearer the connection between culture and holiness. Holiness ultimately is the means by which cultural transformation occurs. John Paul points this out in the connection between Saint Francis of Assisi and the painter Giotto.<sup>46</sup> The saints are behind the great legacy of Catholic culture. This will also be true of the renewal of culture, to which John Paul is calling the church today:

The world has need of priests, religious and laity who are seriously formed by the knowledge of the Church's doctrinal heritage, rich in its bimillenary cultural patrimony, an ever

fruitful source for artists and poets who are able to help the people of God to live the inexhaustible mystery of Christ, celebrated in beauty, meditated in prayer and incarnated in holiness.<sup>47</sup>

If culture will be renewed, its renewal will come only from a renewal of holiness, by which the faith becomes instantiated in the life of the faith. This instantiation will then become a model for others and a source of transformation for the world.

### Conclusion

Christians are living in a somewhat tenuous situation in that faith requires culture in order to be lived as a way of life and yet there are many obstacles to this living in the modern world. Believers are therefore called to dialogue with their fellow human beings and with them to work toward a renewed society. Reflecting on the enormity of the task of cultural renewal, John Paul summarized the effort to engage the modern world and transform it by the gospel aptly:

Yes, we are at the beginning of a gigantic work of evangelization of the modern world. . . . The world has entered an era of profound turmoil, on account of the stupefying range of human inventions, which threaten to destroy humanity itself unless they are integrated into an ethical and spiritual vision. We are entering a new era of human culture, and Christians are faced with an immense challenge.<sup>48</sup>

45. "The New PCC's Tasks: Dialogue with Non-Believers and the Inculturation of Faith," ns. 8-9.

46. See Ibid.

47. "Letting the Gospel Take Root in Every Culture," n. 9.

48. "Changing Times for Human Culture" (January 13, 1986).

This work is only beginning and it will not be easy. Our current time is marked by profound change, especially social change. Shortly after John Paul was writing, our views of marriage and other moral issues, such as illicit drug use, drastically changed. Christians must be proactive in this situation not only to recover lost ground but also to prevent further sliding of moral values.

The task, speaking more positively, can be understood as a reassertion of a genuine humanity in the midst of cultural decline.<sup>49</sup> The problem with modern culture is not simply its denial of Christianity, but more fundamentally, its denial that the truth and goodness of human nature can speak clearly about itself and guide human action (as in the natural law). It is undeniable that there has been a sharp increase in the productivity of culture and great technological advancement. At same time, however, there is a shift away from the dignity of the human person. We are seeking to redefine what it means to be human and have created an artificial cultural life for humanity that has left us estranged from the fundamental realities of family and the natural world. The task ahead may seem overwhelming, but it begins on the personal and familial level as the faith transforms the way we live and our interactions with others. John Paul clearly asserted that faith can and must be a cultural force, one that is much more powerful than any of the obstacles it faces.

In many ways, the problem of the church's engagement with culture centers on the proper expression of freedom. Freedom is one of the highest values in contemporary culture, and it is also one

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49. For a further treatment of the Catholic Church's teaching on how the mission to renew culture is bound up with a renewal of humanity, see R. Jared Staudt, "Restoring Humanity: The Role of the New Evangelization in Cultural Renewal," in *Church Life: A Journal for the New Evangelization* (forthcoming).

of the primary gifts that the church has to offer. It was a genuine Christian culture that helped Poland preserve its spiritual freedom in the midst of brutal oppression. The reawakening of freedom was also crucial in the destruction of the antihuman culture that had arisen within the Soviet bloc. John Paul inspired his countrymen to rediscover their God-given freedom and to work toward the renewal of culture in their homeland. This changed the course of modern history in a completely unexpected way.<sup>50</sup> However, John Paul was quite disappointed by the move toward more reckless freedom that followed the collapse of Communism in Poland.<sup>51</sup> The embrace of freedom for its own sake is not enough for a genuine Catholic or even human culture. Freedom must be followed in such a way that it promotes genuine human flourishing, which requires responsibility and self-sacrifice. Therefore, Christianity is crucial in directing the genuine aspirations of modern culture so that they can find their fulfillment, not only in this life but also in

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50. Although many factors contributed to the collapse of Soviet Communism, both Mikhail Gorbachev and President Reagan publicly acknowledged the critical role played by John Paul II. See George Weigel, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). See also *Nine Days that Changed the World*, DVD, Newt and Callista Gingrich (Citizens United, 2010).

51. This realization that Marxism can be replaced by an opposite negative tendency can be seen in *Centesimus Annus*: "Another kind of response [as opposed to Marxism], practical in nature, is represented by the affluent society or the consumer society. It seeks to defeat Marxism on the level of pure materialism by showing how a free-market society can achieve a greater satisfaction of material human needs than Communism, while equally excluding spiritual values. In reality, while on the one hand it is true that this social model shows the failure of Marxism to contribute to a humane and better society, on the other hand, insofar as it denies an autonomous existence and value to morality, law, culture and religion, it agrees with Marxism, in the sense that it totally reduces man to the sphere of economics and the satisfaction of material needs" (n. 19).

pointing toward a way of life that will not end. There is no opposition between human flourishing in this life and the next. Rather, Christianity shows how to live in a genuinely human and free culture in this life such that its fruits will last beyond the passing of this world.

*R. Jared Staudt is assistant professor of theology and catechesis at the Augustine Institute in Denver, Colorado. He is also co-editor of the English edition of the journal Nova et Vetera. His interests include systematic theology, St. Thomas Aquinas, the relation of religion and culture, and Catholic education. Staudt earned his doctorate in systematic theology from Ave Maria University and has published articles in journals such as Logos, The Thomist, and Nova et Vetera.*