

The Evangelical Potential of the Byzantine Liturgy in a Culture of Efficiency and Death

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Abstract

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Building upon earlier analyses of Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* ("on the gospel of life"), the author argues that the Catholic Church is undergoing its own internal crises concomitant with the most profound disaster in Western culture of our time, abortion. Noting that reputable scientific statistics record over fifty million abortions around the world each year, the author unfolds the papal analysis of this crisis to reveal at its heart a metaphysical structure of evil whose core value is that of efficiency. Following Josef Pieper's argument that efficiency can only be transformed through a renewed culture of leisure, which itself is inexorably bound up with a renewed celebration of liturgy, the author then argues that the transformation necessary to build what John Paul II calls a "culture of life" may come in part through liturgy. Following the liturgical scholarship of Alexander Schmemmann, Joseph Ratzinger, and Catherine Pickstock, together with the work of Robert Taft and Romano Guardini, the author undertakes an analysis of the structural repetitions built into the Byzantine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, focusing in particular on the several litanies which recur throughout that liturgy, to argue that such repetitions point to a unique liturgical ethos which may be useful in an evangelically counter-cultural witness whose goal is the transformation of a culture of efficiency into a culture in which children are welcomed to engage in "holy play" before their heavenly Father.



Introduction

Writing in the late 1930s, Hans Urs von Balthasar observed a process of destruction of the Church, and therefore of the Western culture formed by her, that has only increased in the intervening sixty-five years.¹ In his arresting image, von Balthasar noted that “the tree of culture is now being stripped of its leaves,”² a process of denudation which has only increased and indeed accelerated as the years of the twentieth century went by, leading von Balthasar later to remark in another place that “the Christians of today [are] living in a night which is deeper than that of the later Middle Ages.”³ In the closing years of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, this seemingly pessimistic and once lonely voice of von Balthasar has been joined by a veritable chorus of other theologians soberly assessing the present situation and demonstrating how prophetic von Balthasar was. Thus, for example, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger in 1985 confirmed von Balthasar’s prognostication of what would happen to the Church: “it is incontestable that the last ten years have been decidedly unfavorable for the Catholic Church.”⁴ A little more than a decade later, this diagnosis was given in a more amplified form by the prominent English Dominican theologian, Aidan

¹Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves,” *Communio* 25 (1997): 347–96. (This essay was originally published in 1939.)

²*Ibid.*, 347.

³Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, 7 vols., ed. John Riches, trans. Brian McNeil et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 5:648.

⁴Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, trans. Salvator Attansio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 29. This theme of a new dark age was given its perhaps most influential articulation in the widely read book of Alasdair MacIntyre, the Thomistic moral philosopher and one of the most influential Anglo-American philosophers of the latter half of the twentieth century. In his *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), MacIntyre wrote that while “it is always dangerous to draw too precise parallels between one historical period and another...nonetheless certain parallels there are” and thus we may speak of “the coming ages of barbarism and darkness,” the “new dark ages which are already upon us” (*Ibid.*, 244–45).

Nichols. Writing in *Christendom Awake: On Reenergizing the Church in Culture*, Nichols argues that “at the present time, the Catholic Church, in many parts of the world, is undergoing one of the *most serious crises in its history*, a crisis resulting from a disorienting encounter with secular culture and compounded by a failure of Christian discernment on the part of many people over the last quarter century from the highest office-holders to the ordinary faithful.”⁵

The manifestations of this crisis are multiform, and many can be gleaned from simply surveying the astonishing number of writings of Pope John Paul II⁶, who has spoken, inter alia, of: a crisis in catechetics⁷; a catastrophic collapse in the sacrament of reconciliation⁸; widespread doubt about basic moral teachings⁹; skepticism about the capacity of human reason

⁵Aidan Nichols, *Christendom Awake: On Reenergizing the Church in Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 186 (emphasis mine). I have examined some aspects of this crisis elsewhere and, in particular, what to do about it. See my “When Sects Put us to Shame: The Enfeeblement of the Church,” *Catholic Insight* 11 (2003): 36–39.

⁶The best biography of this pope remains George Weigel’s *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999).

⁷See his apostolic exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae*, issued 16 October 1979 and available from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jpii_exh_16101979_catechesitradendae_en.html. All references henceforth to Vatican documents will, following accepted protocol, refer to their paragraph numbers in the official English translation. Rather than refer to the several different English translations extant (e.g., those of the Paulist Press, those in *Origins*, etc.), I will give instead the URL to the Vatican website for ease of access.

⁸See his 1984 apostolic exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*. Available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia_en.html. (The Holy Father is quite blunt at points: “the sacrament of penance is in crisis,” he declares in no. 28 of the exhortation.)

⁹See his 1993 encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, where he recognizes that “a new situation has come about *within the Christian community itself*, which has experienced the spread of numerous doubts and objections of a human and psychological, social and cultural, religious and even properly theological nature, with regard to the Church’s moral teachings. It is no longer a matter of limited and occasional dissent, but of an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine” (no. 4). Available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/index.htm.