

EPIPHANY OF LOVE: MORALITY, COSMOLOGY, AND CULTURE

• Livio Melina •

“For there to be an epiphany of love,
the most urgent task is to reconcile work and
love and to understand nature and culture as
belonging to one and the same path that is
directed towards communion.”



“What is the essence of Christianity?” With this question Hans Urs von Balthasar begins his programmatic text, *Love Alone Is Credible*. In fact, it is a question that many other theologians and Christian thinkers of the past century have asked themselves¹ in an attempt to respond to Feuerbach’s challenge. They are united in the common concern to rediscover the center of the Gospel message, resisting any reductions and deformations, so as to restore the Gospel’s missionary momentum and to allow for a new encounter with the expectations of the hearts of contemporary men and women.

Particularly in the century recently past, many voices cried out against moralism, attempting to emphasize that the Christian life is distinct from morality or at least transcends it. The goal was to loosen the deadly grip of the idea prevalent since the Age of the Enlightenment that being a Christian can simply be identified with a commitment to ethical rectitude. Friedrich Nietzsche took up this

¹One may refer to the works of A. von Harnack, K. Adam, R. Guardini, B. Forte, among others.

accusation in a shrill and jeering manner: for him, in its very essence Christianity was a morality that negates life and joy. With its prohibitions against man's natural instincts and the free expansion of the will, it represents a sickly manifestation of resentment, the hypocritical vengeance of the weak against the vital affirmation of the strong.²

Freeing Christian experience from this moralistic interpretation is therefore certainly a most urgent apologetic imperative: it permits us to repudiate such accusations and allows for a new evangelization. On the other hand, one must not fall into an equally one-sided anti-moralism, which underestimates the importance of free actions with regard to salvation and reduces Christianity to either aestheticism or quietism.³ What, then, is the place of morality in the Christian experience?

*1. The place of morality
and the meaning of moralism*

At the beginning of his *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar proposes a radical question: "Who acts, who can act, if God is on stage?"⁴ If God, in order to be truly God, must by his essence be "all" (Sir 43:27), where is the space for man to act? Clearly God, as Creator, is always involved in the actions of the human person. He is their foundation. The believer knows that it is God who works in us "both to will and to do" (Phil 2:13), he, the Father, who "is always at work" (Jn 5:17).

Nonetheless, for there to be true action, there will also have to be a space for the dramatic risk of human freedom. "Initium ut esset creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit": Man was created with the power of beginning something new, according to the thought-

²Cf. F. Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, trans. H. L. Mencken (New York: Knopf, 1920), 7–10. For a critique of Nietzsche in this regard, cf. D. L. Schindler, "Is Truth Ugly? Moralism and the Convertibility of Being and Love," *Communio* 27, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 701–728.

³Cf. L. Melina, "The Fullness of Christian Action: Beyond Moralism and Anti-Moralism," forthcoming in *Logos*.

⁴H. U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama (=TD)*, vol. 2: *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 17.

provoking expression of St. Augustine, which inspired Hannah Arendt's action theory.⁵ Freedom is the power to introduce novelty into the cyclical time of history, breaking the pre-established schemes of physical laws and natural instincts. The real possibility of a finite freedom *next* to the infinite freedom of God has its ultimate and sole foundation in the trinitarian mystery, *internal* to which it is found in the christological analogy as a call to filial freedom by means of the gift of the Spirit.⁶ "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).

With these rapid and luminous brushstrokes, Balthasar outlines the theological context in which human action finds its place: it is located within the Theo-drama. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, as well, has clearly indicated that it is necessary to keep in mind this broad background in order to approach the questions of moral theology and finally to avoid the opposite extremes of moralism and anti-moralism. When presenting the encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, he affirmed that the fundamental issue of Christian morality is "the collaboration of human action and divine action in the full realization of man."⁷

In this way, we are also able to say in what moralism truly consists. Balthasar himself defines it as the detachment of action from its "abode." With reference to the μένειν of John 15, he says, "Without this 'abiding,' once faith had perceived the gift of God, our action would be inclined to rush around trying to make an appropriate response to God's initiative through compulsive,

⁵Saint Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XII, 20, 4. For a study of Hannah Arendt's action theory in the light of her work *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin*, see the doctoral dissertation by Stephan M. Kampowski, "Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning—Hannah Arendt's Theory of Action and Moral Thought in the Light of *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin*," written under my direction at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family at the Lateran University in Rome (in the academic year 2004/2005); publication forthcoming.

⁶Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Teo-drammatica*, vol. II: *Le persone del dramma: l'uomo in Dio*, Italian translation by G. Sommovilla (Milan: Jaca Book, 1982), 247–256. For an English translation, see *TD 2*.

⁷J. Ratzinger, "Genesi e contenuti essenziali dell'enciclica *Veritatis splendor*," in *La via della fede. Le ragioni dell'etica nell'epoca presente* (Milan: Ares, 1996), 96. In this regard, see *Camminare nella Luce. Prospettive della teologia morale a partire da Veritatis splendor*, ed. L. Melina and J. Noriega (Rome: PUL, 2004).

overhasty undertakings and attempts to change the world. That would be ‘works’ in the sense in which Jesus and Paul reject them.”⁸

Moralism is therefore primarily a hypertrophy, an overgrowth, of action that has lost its context, its origin and goal. It is the presumptuous effort on the part of action to break free from its foundation, to be without presuppositions of meaning, to aspire to change the world by itself. A freedom that is without nature or even opposed to nature tends to assert itself as pure will. Without a place from which it springs and without a destination at which it aims, without memory and without vocation, action becomes the utopian pretense of the new, which, having cut its roots, paradoxically condemns itself to sterility, to an infinite repetition of the same.

But in a more modest, less heroic form, moralism is also the vexation of action; it perceives rules as extraneous, imposed on action from the outside to limit its dynamic movement towards fulfillment. With its roots cut and its destiny forgotten, freedom feels constrained and coerced by any rule. Legalism, which elevates rules to abstract absolutes that take the place of the living God, inevitably perceives the law solely as an extrinsic limit imposed on action by an arbitrary will.⁹ Even if it yields to laws with forced submission, at heart it dreams of a world without them.

And from another angle, we can see that also abstract rationalism turns out to be a variation of moralism. It sees ethics as the discipline that applies theoretical principles of reason to practical life, that is, as the discipline that deduces norms from truths that are understood on a purely speculative level. But action never springs from the mere application of theoretical truths, because, as Aristotle has observed, thought by itself does not move anything: to be effective, it needs to be inseparably related to desire.¹⁰ The adage *agere sequitur esse* expresses a valid metaphysical axiom when understood as subsequent to the dynamic movement of action, but it

⁸Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Truth Is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 116–117.

⁹Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, “Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics,” proposition 6, in *Principles of Christian Morality*, by J. Ratzinger, H. Schürmann, and H. U. von Balthasar, trans. G. Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986).

¹⁰Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a 36, b 7. Cf. L. R. Kass, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity. The Challenge for Bioethics* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002), 68.

cannot serve as an epistemological principle that indicates the good to be done and that directs our actions.¹¹ These critical remarks regarding some characteristics of moral theology fundamentally lead to one and the same conclusion: if human action loses its context, its sense of origin and meaning within the divine Theo-drama, it is doomed to an empty, rhetorical, hypertrophical excess or to a humiliating submission to the law. And in this way moralism and antimoralism reveal themselves as two sides of the same coin, a coin with which freedom will never be able to pay the price of its authentic realization.

The encyclical *Veritatis splendor* has shown that the most acute problems of moral theology on the level of ethical theory (utilitarianism, proportionalism, situation ethics, relativism, and subjectivism) in fact have their roots in a theological deficiency.¹² Once action is separated from its theological context, ethical reflection is impoverished. It is either reduced to naturalism, which aims at the fulfillment of our aspirations (eudaimonism), or to a verification of the conformity of action to the law (legalism), or to a deliberate and careful calculation of its exterior consequences (proportionalism). The only way to avoid the hypertrophic excess of moralism or the sterility of antimoralism will be to “reassess” human action theologically, to understand action within the theological context in which the freedom of a finite creature finds its significance, that is, in relation to his origin and destiny.

2. *Communion as the abode and destiny of freedom*

Freedom finds its original context of meaning in the relationship with the other. The original experience in which man grasps the moral dimension of his action is the encounter with the person of the other. Emmanuel Lévinas has certainly grasped the

¹¹In this regard, see: J. J. Pérez-Soba, “Operari sequitur esse?” in *La plenitud del obrar cristiano. Dinámica de la acción y perspectiva teológica de la moral*, by L. Melina, J. Noriega, and J. J. Pérez-Soba (Madrid: Palabra, 2001), 65–83.

¹²As to historical research, it has been convincingly demonstrated that the origins of utilitarianism are found in the secularization of Christian prudence that occurred in the context of the Reformation and specifically in the preaching of the reformed Scottish clergy: B. Wald, *Genitrix virtutum. Zum Wandel des aristotelischen Begriffs praktischer Vernunft* (Münster, 1986).

fundamental element of this original experience when he speaks about the absolute appeal with which the face of the other confronts freedom: “Do not kill me!” But this expresses only the negative character of the appeal.¹³ As a matter of fact, the ethical dimension of the encounter with the other is more radical: it presents the subject with the original experience of a gratuitous gift that contains a rich promise and a vivid invitation and that ultimately grounds freedom’s dynamic movement towards communion. In his *Nine Propositions*, Balthasar points in this direction when he observes, “Man . . . is awakened to a theoretical/practical self-awareness thanks to a voluntary and loving challenge on the part of his fellow man.” In this way, “the summons that comes from our fellow man has the same (transcendental and dialogical) origin as the call of the good in itself, pure and simple.”¹⁴

For this reason, desire is not the *primum* at the origin of the dynamic movement of action: “*Amor praecedit desiderium*.”¹⁵ In the context of a question about the reciprocal order of the human passions, St. Thomas affirms the precedence of love over desire. Prior to action and at its very origin, there is a passion: it is the attraction that we undergo when an external reality affects us that awakens the dynamic movement of desire. In order to desire, it is necessary to love (“*desiderium ex amore*”¹⁶). Love is first of all the gift of a presence that affects the subject, promising rich fulfillment. In this way, love provokes the subject’s movement towards union, a union that is not only affective but real.

Thus, in comparison to Aristotle’s account of the natural dynamics of love as the simple desire of the good, the Christian vision of love introduces a significant novelty. In fact, the good no longer appears solely under the aspect of its appetibility, that is, its capacity to satisfy subjective desire. Rather, it reveals itself under the aspect of the prior presence of a gift. This gift communicates itself,

¹³Cf. Th. B. Akoha, *De l’amour de la sagesse à la sagesse de l’amour. Vers une fondation de la morale de l’interpersonnalité dans la pensée d’Emmanuel Lévinas* (Rome: PUL, 2004).

¹⁴Balthasar, “Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics,” proposition 7.

¹⁵STI-II, q. 25, a. 2. In this regard, see L. Melina, “Amore, desiderio e azione,” in *Cristo e il dinamismo dell’agire. Linee di rinnovamento della Teologia Morale Fondamentale* (Rome: PUL-Mursia, 2001), 19–35.

¹⁶*Contra Gentiles*, IV, 54, n. 3926.

inviting the subject to find fulfillment in an encounter and in communion. This Thomistic understanding draws out the ultimate consequences of the idea of love as *vis unitiva et concretiva*, an idea that is characteristic of Pseudo-Dionysius¹⁷ and that implies a constitutive and irreducible polarity between lover and beloved, understandable only in an interpersonal context.

These considerations have important repercussions for freedom, which finds its abode in the reciprocity of personal relationships and which is oriented towards the gift of self for the sake of communion. In this context, the famous conciliar affirmation of *Gaudium et spes*, 24: “man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself,” finds an extraordinary echo in Balthasar’s vision: “Finite freedom only exists in the interrelationship of human beings, particularly since each new human being comes about through other human beings and only awakens to ‘being human’ through the encounter with others, with their freedom and free response. The child arrives with its own freedom; and it is given (by its mother) this other freedom that comes from being in a society with others.”¹⁸

Freedom is intimately oriented towards love, precisely because it is preceded by a gift and inserted into a web of relationships, inciting it towards the fullness of communion. Freedom is anything but empty of contents and “indifferent”; it is not primarily a freedom of choice as understood by the liberal tradition.¹⁹ Recognizing its being as a gift, it is oriented towards giving itself to others.

But the ultimate and true foundation of freedom, and hence of action, is the love of God. As Trinity, God is the living freedom of the reciprocal gift among the divine persons.²⁰ The New Testa-

¹⁷Cf. *ST* q. 25, a. 2; cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *De Divinis Nominibus* IV, §12: PG 3, 709. Fundamental in this regard is the work of J. J. Pérez-Soba, “*Amor es nombre de persona.*” *Estudio de la interpersonalidad en el amor en Santo Tomás de Aquino* (Rome: PUL-Mursia, 2001).

¹⁸*TD* 2, 203.

¹⁹Cf. S. Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. M. T. Noble (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1995), 327–353; cf. also D. L. Schindler, “The Significance of World and Culture for Moral Theology: *Veritatis splendor* and the ‘Nuptial-Sacramental’ Nature of the Body,” *Communio* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2004).

²⁰Regarding the trinitarian foundation of freedom, see J. Noriega, “The Origin and Destiny of Freedom,” in *Communio* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 282–299.

ment revelation of the divine mystery presents God as personal allegiance, as a free gift of self, as the reciprocity of love.²¹ Outside the mystery of trinitarian communion, human freedom degenerates into self-sufficient individualism or anonymous collectivism. If God's call, which stands at the very foundation of reciprocity, is excluded, then interhuman exchanges and gifts remain limited and calculated. In this case, intersubjectivity either becomes a mere function of the fulfillment of the transcendental subject or it simply refers to the exterior way in which persons confront each other like monads that ultimately remain impenetrable.²² The fact is, however, that the real union of the sons of God in truth and love can manifest a certain likeness with the union of the divine persons (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 24). Communion is at the same time the proper dwelling place of freedom and its destiny: it is the dwelling place of freedom because of the original gift that makes freedom possible and orients it; it is the destiny of freedom because it is the goal towards which freedom is called: freedom is called to fulfill itself in the giving of itself.

3. *Nature and the world in action*

The response to love can only be love. God's absolute and unconditional love cannot find adequate reciprocation in any one particular work but only in a total consent, which will take the form of Mary's *fiat*.²³ Christian freedom finds its concrete exemplary actualization in a dynamic movement that constantly reaches out to take on the form of Christ's love. This gift of charity is never at the disposal of man as if it were a possession in his command: it is rather charity that disposes of man and organizes his being and activity.

Nonetheless, to become concrete, love has to express itself in choices, in the manifold forms of the particular actions of life. Precisely in order to realize itself in history and in order to transform the world, love stands in need of the virtues: charity must become

²¹Cf. M. Blondel, *L'Être et les êtres*, 2nd ed. (Paris: PUF, 1963), 195–199; M. Nédoncelle, *La Réciprocité des Consciences* (Paris: Aubier, 1942), 99–100, both cited in Balthasar, *Le persone del dramma: l'uomo in Dio*, vol. II, 198 (TD 2).

²²Balthasar, "Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics," proposition 9.

²³H. U. von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 125–138.

the form of the virtues.²⁴ In fact, charity by itself is not enough for action: charity allows us to act with the best of intentions, but these are not sufficient to guarantee that our actions are truly a realization of love.

St. Thomas Aquinas explains this phenomenon by observing that among all the movements of the soul, only the movement of love does not tend to one object but to two: the other person, with whom one desires to enter into communion, and the good that one wishes for him, which serves as the factual expression of love in action. “*Amare est velle alicui bonum*”²⁵: to love means to wish the good to someone. Although ultimately and formally, the intentionality of love is directed towards to the person of the other, it is mediated by the choice of what is truly good for him. The good of the particular action that mediates love in the perspective of interpersonal communion has an objective import independent from the subject. Reason must verify that the good of this particular action is really adequate to promoting the good of the person of the other and reciprocal communion. The readiness to submit oneself to the truth about the good guarantees the authenticity of love; it ensures that the intention of the acting subject does not turn in upon itself but goes out of itself, aiming at the person of the friend.

In this way nature enters into the dynamics of action: nature gives shape to the action with which—by means of our choice of what is good for the other person—we intend to promote communion.

Even if in fact nothing presents itself as good if not in reference to the person whom we love²⁶—at heart, the good we desire is that of communion—it is precisely the authenticity of this love that requires us to search for what is truly good. The moral significance of what is natural does not derive from a metaphysical consideration of human nature as such but rather from the fact that practical reason understands it as a human good.²⁷ Our natural

²⁴Cf. P. J. Wadell, *The Primacy of Love. An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 125–141.

²⁵Cf. *ST I-II*, q. 26, a. 4; *Contra Gentiles*, III, ch. 90, n. 2657.

²⁶Cf. D. M. Gallagher, “Person and Ethics in Thomas Aquinas,” *Acta Philosophica* 4, no. 1 (1995): 51–71.

²⁷Cf. M. Rhonheimer, “The Moral Significance of Pre-Rational Nature in Aquinas: A Reply to Jean Porter (and Stanley Hauerwas),” *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 48 (2003): 253–280; more detailed in: M. Rhonheimer, *Natural Law*

inclinations towards the different “goods for the person” acquire moral significance in the perspective of the “good of the person” as such, that is, in the perspective of the free fulfillment of the person in love.²⁸ Hence, from the moral point of view, the human good is the good of reason (*bonum rationis*), which coincides with the good of virtue (*bonum virtutis*).

Even if ontologically, metaphysically, or anthropologically speaking, the moral good is founded on human nature, epistemologically it is not deduced from a previous speculative knowledge but understood by practical reason in an original moral experience. At the same time, in constituting its order, reason is not autonomous from nature or even contrary to it, but it is itself rooted in nature (*ratio ut natura*), thus participating in the creative wisdom of God (*lex aeterna*). At the beginning of the order that practical reason introduces into human acts, there is a moment of passivity, insofar as practical reason participates in the order of a superior Reason. Human reason is the reason of a being that is a substantial unity of body and soul: man does not relate to his bodily nature as something inferior and instrumental but as a constitutive part of himself. In this way the harmful dichotomy between nature and reason is overcome. (On the one hand, this dichotomy leads to a naturalism that fails to appreciate the originality of the moral good as good of the person; on the other hand, it leads to an autonomism that considers human nature as a premoral dimension, subject to creative manipulation at the hands of freedom.)

From the metaphysical viewpoint, the vision of nature and of the goods for the person is objectively founded on an understanding of creation as a gift. The reality of the world is not a mere *given*, a matter devoid of meaning and therefore manipulable at will. The world, too, is a *gift*, which carries in itself the mark of the free generosity of the Giver.²⁹ And at the same time the world is an

and Practical Reason. A Thomistic View of Moral Autonomy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 58–175.

²⁸An articulate explication of this personalistic understanding of natural law is found in: *Il bene della persona nell'agire*, ed. L. Melina and J. J. Pérez-Soba (Rome: PUL, 2002).

²⁹Cf. K. L. Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982), 34–63.

invitation to reciprocity, to unite ourselves to the original intention of the Giver, fulfilling it in the communion of persons.

Scientific rationality sees in nature nothing but the factual datum, because it methodologically abstracts from concrete reality. Here we find the specific temptation of technology: in the words of John Paul II in his encyclical *Fides et ratio*, it is the temptation of exercising “a quasi-divine power over nature and even over the human being” (no. 46). According to Hans Jonas, the metaphysical degradation of man—a consequence of the one-sidedness of scientific reason, which is in turn associated with the enormous growth of man’s power thanks to modern technology—constitutes the principal ethical challenge of our time. Under the objectivizing glance of science, nature is reduced to atoms and to causes devoid of purpose; it is deprived of any dignity of its own. Now, whatever does not inspire any respect can be subjected and manipulated as an object of an unlimited use. “If there is nothing definite in nature, no structure in its products responding to a goal, then it is licit to do with it whatever one pleases without thereby violating its integrity, because there is no integrity in a nature understood exclusively in terms of natural science, a nature neither created nor creative. If nature is a mere object and in no sense a subject, if it does not express any creative will, then man remains the only subject and the only will. The world, then, from of old the object of human knowledge, now becomes the object of man’s will, which is evidently the will to power over things. Once the growth of power has exceeded necessity, this will turns into desire pure and simple, a desire without limits.”³⁰

Perhaps the most extreme point that the global enterprise of modern science can reach is biotechnology applied to man. At this point, scientific and technological progress takes for its object its very author in the Promethean intent to play God, summed up in the distorted idea of the total manipulability of the human being. By means of biotechnology man becomes the programmer and creator of himself. The Nietzschean program by which “*der Mensch ist sein eigenes Experiment*” [“man is his own experiment”] becomes ever less exciting and ever more disturbing, to the extent to which one adheres to a reductionistic, materialistic, and deterministic vision of

³⁰H. Jonas, *Dalla fede antica all'uomo tecnologico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991), 262–263.

“human life that both gives us enormous power and, at the same time, denies every possibility of non-arbitrary standards for guiding its use.”³¹ The loss of the metaphysical capacity of reason, reduced to scientific and technological rationality, goes hand in hand with the loss of the authentically moral dimension of practical reason, reduced to a utilitarian calculation of advantages and disadvantages. Detached from nature and opposed to it, reason loses any point of reference, and freedom, in the delusion of omnipotence, destroys itself.

4. *Culture: the transfiguration of the world
and the epiphany of love*

At this point the characteristic features of an anti-culture—or, according to the phrase coined by the encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, a “culture of death”—emerge. Insofar as it is an anti-culture, it is the process of the de-humanization of social relations and of the world, culminating in a tragic alliance with death, “the last enemy” (1 Cor 15:26). The battle for life thus acquires the character and the dimension of an eschatological struggle, which, insofar as it reestablishes man’s relation to his origin, allows him to rediscover the road towards the destiny of communion for which he was created. The right road to take will be that of reconciling freedom and nature in the perspective of the fulfillment of love. It is on this level that the issue of elaborating an authentic culture arises.

In his famous address to UNESCO, dedicated to the question of culture, John Paul II proposed a suggestive definition: “Man, who in the visible world is the only ontic subject of culture, is also its only object and its end. Culture is that by which man, as man, becomes more human, ‘is’ more, approaches more to being.”³² It is therefore thanks to culture that man lives a truly human life: “Life is culture also in the sense that man distinguishes and differen-

³¹Kass, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity*, 138. For considerations going into the same direction, see F. Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future. Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002).

³²John Paul II, *Allocuzione all’Unesco*, 2 June 1980, in *La Traccia* 1, no. 6 (1980): 472–480. In this regard, see L. Negri, *L’uomo e la cultura nel magistero di Giovanni Paolo II* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1998).

tiates himself by it from everything else that exists in the visible world: man cannot be outside of culture.”³³

Thus, culture can be understood as man’s unceasing work to humanize nature, cultivating it in himself and outside himself. Between nature and culture there is therefore a reciprocal and permanent implication. On the one hand, nature is always interior to culture, because only reason, in its metaphysical and moral dimensions, can grasp the human value of nature, its sense and its destiny. On the other hand, culture itself is interior to nature, finding in it its inmost criterion of verification and development.³⁴

This reciprocal immanence of nature and freedom finds its highest point of realization in the moral virtues, by means of which man transforms and perfects the nature that he is himself. By means of the virtues, that which is simply “nature” (our spontaneous inclinations towards the human goods) acquires the free dimension of love, which chooses according to a rational and human order in view of the integral good of the person and the communion of persons. In this way, the virtues become a second nature, matured in the exercise of action, which, far from taking away freedom, informs it in view of creative choices, truly introducing the novelty of excellent action into the world.³⁵ Hence, the virtues bring about a new sociality. In this way, one can see that the problem of culture is not essentially a problem of technical development. It is not even a question of the growth of rational knowledge but rather a problem of morality, of the authentic cultivation of man in view of his destiny.

Even though culture primarily concerns the interior formation of the human subject, it also has the exterior aspect of humanizing the natural and social environment. Entrusted to human beings as a garden to be cultivated, the world is called to be the place and setting where love is manifested.³⁶ And love, which is stirred by the hidden beauty of the beloved, knows how to awaken beauty

³³Ibid.

³⁴See D. L. Schindler, “The Significance of World and Culture.”

³⁵Cf. S. Pinckaers, “La vertu est toute autre chose qu’une habitude,” in *Le renouveau de la morale. Études pour une morale fidèle à ses sources et à sa mission présente* (Tournai: Casterman, 1964), 144–161; id., “Rediscovering Virtue,” *The Thomist* 60, no. 3 (1996): 361–378.

³⁶In this context, we would like to recall the suggestive meditation by S. Grygiel, “Famiglia—cultura,” *Anthropotes* 19, no. 1 (2003): 25–30.

around itself, precisely because it does not look at things exclusively with the eyes of calculating reason, which only sees in them their instrumental adeptness to some utilitarian project; rather, love recognizes in things the gratuitous form of the gift and the possibility that they become signs and occasions of a new and greater love. Only love knows how to see and value the symbolic character of the real, appreciating the dynamic movement with which the real reveals the original gift and tends towards further fulfillment. A noted Polish poet, Cyprian Norwid, writes, “Beauty is to enthuse us for work, and work is to raise us up.”³⁷

Man’s work with nature for the sake of culture takes on the character of strenuous toil.³⁸ There is good reason why in some languages “work” and “toil” have the same root. Morality, as the interior aspect of culture, unites itself with the transformation of the world, as the exterior aspect of culture. With both dimensions, man’s toil and effort is motivated by love alone and directed towards giving birth to the fruit of love.

For there to be an epiphany of love, the most urgent task is to reconcile work and love and to understand nature and culture as belonging to one and the same path that is directed towards communion. Without love, work is the toil of slaves, and without work, love is a futile evasion. Eric Fromm writes, “The essence of love is to work for something, ‘to make something grow’ . . . love and work are inseparable. One loves what one works for and one works for what one loves.”³⁹ “We know that all of creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:22–23).—*Translated by Stephan Kampowski.* □

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³⁷C. Norwid, *Promethidion: Bogumil*, vv. 185–186: *Pisma wybrane* (Warsaw, 1968), vol. 2, 216. The citation is from *Letter to Artists* (n. 3) by John Paul II (1999).

³⁸Cf. A. Scola, “Il travaglio dell’uomo post-moderno,” presentation given at the “VI Forum del Progetto culturale CEI” in Rome, 12 April 2004.

³⁹E. Fromm, *L’arte di amare* (Milan: Cil, 1963), 42. On the same topic, see F. Botturi, “Etica degli affetti,” in *Affetti e legami*, ed. F. Botturi and C. Vigna, *Annuario di Etica* 1 (2004) (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 2004), 37–64.