

On Catholic Responses to Our Devastated *Saeculum*

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LET ME BEGIN with some remarks about the title of our Thomistic Institute symposium, “Intellectual Origins of Secularization and Catholic Intellectual Responses.” To engage in speculation about origins, particularly where a phenomenon as complex as secularization is concerned, is bound to entangle us in the condition we are asked to diagnose. Thus, Alasdair MacIntyre has observed how genealogical inquiry, itself a distinctly modern endeavor, tends to “repudiate all the key features of accountability, understood in terms either of Socratic dialectic or of Augustinian confession.” Implicitly, that is, a genealogical narrative about origins embraces the project of intellectual emancipation and demystification that drives David Hume’s and Immanuel Kant’s Enlightenment critiques of reason, and that is subsequently radicalized (and predictably turned against the Enlightenment itself) by Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. Hence, MacIntyre notes, “the genealogical stance is dependent for its concepts and its modes of argument, for its theses and its style, upon a set of contrasts between it and that which it aspires to overcome—the extent, that is, to which it is derivative from and even parasitic upon its antagonisms . . . drawing its necessary sustenance from that which it professes to have discarded.”¹ Genealogical accounts of secularization and its putative “intellectual origins” are liable to remain beholden to a distinctly modern, secular conception of time that will alternatively take the form of a stridently progressive or an inexorably declensionist narrative.

Not coincidentally, genealogical accounts of either kind first came to

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 205, 215.

be championed both by major proponents of the secular Enlightenment and by some of its fiercest critics. We think of William Robertson's *A View of the Progress of Society in Europe from the Subversion of the Roman Empire to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century* (1769), David Hume's *History of England* (1754–1761), Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789), and Immanuel Kant's *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* and *Ideas for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* (both in 1783). Concurrently, an equivocal or outright declensionist account of history, understood as a fatal and irreversible lapse from an original state, informs Jean-Jacques Rousseau's essay *On the Origin of Language* (1749) and his second *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), which are unique in this regard and present him as both one of the major progenitors of a secular modernity and one of its sharpest critics. The list of writers engaged in fashioning origin-and-progress or decline-and-fall narratives could be extended almost indefinitely, to include Lord Monboddo (James Burnett), Edmund Burke, Johann Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Georg Hegel, Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Jules Michelet, Leopold von Ranke, Heinrich von Treitschke, Max Weber, Oswald Spengler, and so on. Suffice it to say, to frame our topic in terms of origins and the intellectual genre of a "genealogy" is to be implicated in a historicist conception of time that (for better or worse) bears the imprint of *homo faber* and to embrace what Charles Taylor has labeled modernity's "immanent frame." Whatever its particular "findings" may turn out to be, genealogical inquiry constitutes an implicitly secular undertaking, and as such, cannot elucidate the meaning of a secularity it already presupposes.²

A second set of questions arises from the invitation that we specifically attend to the *intellectual* origins of secularity. To be sure, any attempt to understand our present, secular condition will take the form of some intellectual account or argument. We may identify major patterns and topoi that seem palpably secular in kind and contrast them with the robustly theist metaphysics that gradually shaped Europe, the eastern Mediterranean, and

² MacIntyre's incisive critique of it notwithstanding, the genealogical model still holds considerable appeal even today; examples would include Michael Gillespie's *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (2008), Jonathan Israel's triumphalist *Revolution of the Mind*, subtitled *Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (2011), or Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (2012), a charmingly simple-minded paean to Lucretius as the progenitor of our anthropocentric, secular modernity. For a far more nuanced and reflective account, see Louis Dupré's *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (2004).

in time the Slavic East between the third and the tenth century. While reconstructing such patterns and motifs is indeed an intellectual activity, it does not follow that the phenomena under investigation will themselves be of an intellectual nature. Arguably the most significant case in point, and the backdrop for this paper, concerns the rise of modern entrepreneurial and financial capitalism in late-seventeenth-century England. What in time came to be known as political economy had been unfolding as a set of loosely coordinated *practices* at least half a century before it would receive any coherent intellectual account and moral justification. Long before Hume, James Steuart, and Adam Smith set out to conceptualize the dramatically altered role of money, interest, and commerce, various institutional and political developments had unleashed an unprecedented “passion” for primitive accumulation and a distinctly secular ethic of “possessive individualism.”³ As a result, a normative moral vocabulary insistently cross-referencing economic self-interest with the sins of pride, envy, and greed—and thus holding individual economic choice answerable to norms of custom, conscience, and the Church—came to be supplanted by a new, strictly calculative and instrumental type of economic rationality. As real things and the soil that had sustained all forms of life since time immemorial were being transmuted into endlessly fungible commodities, the normative and transgenerational idea of a common good vetted by the authority of custom and conscience quickly vanished. Its place was filled by an a-social interestedness and a pathological acquisitiveness no longer tempered by considerations of social responsibility and intergenerational symmetry, but subject only to the impersonal, systemic super-ego of the modern marketplace. Starting in the early 1700s, such interestedness challenged, and in time displaced, outright central metaphysical tenets of the pre-modern era, including those of charity and the common good, the moral virtues, an understanding of the created world not as inert *res*

³ On the disciplining of the economic “passions” (greed, avarice, etc.) by the market that converts them into “interests,” see Albert Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 7–66. On the emergence of a “post-civic man [who] has ceased to be virtuous and no longer lives in the present, except as constituted by his fantasies concerning a future,” see J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 51–72 and 103–24 (quote at 112). The phrase “possessive individualism” was coined by C. B. Macpherson who, in his eponymous 1962 book, traces how from Hobbes to Locke a political theory was being formulated according to which the individual proprietor of skills and assets no longer stands in any material or moral obligation vis-à-vis other people, let alone the community at large.

extensa but as manifesting the Divine *logos*, and a conception of the human person as defined by her capacity for responsible choice and by the will as rational appetite.

Viewed in progression, the classics of eighteenth-century political economy (from Hume's 1754 *Essays*, via Steuart and Smith, to Jeremy Bentham, Thomas Malthus, and David Ricardo) tell a clear story: early capitalist practice not only *preceded* intellectual argument in time but positively shaped (and constrained) the "conclusions" subsequently drawn by economic, social, and moral theory.⁴ Still, to contend that economic practice preceded the recalibration of intellectual and theological culture, first in Anglo-Protestant England and eventually across the Continent, is not to deny the impact of more distant theological shifts, particularly that of fourteenth-century voluntarism. For by untethering rational agency from the Aristotle-based *logos* metaphysics that had furnished the normative (intellectual) foundation for religious and social life from the late-patristic era into the early modern period, Ockham and those following him created a kind of metaphysical and ethical vacuum that, in time, would be filled by the "immanent" frames of seventeenth-century scientific culture and, soon afterwards, by the secular practices and institutions constitutive of modern political economy. Quite inadvertently, that is, voluntarism's fateful disaggregation of will and reason ended up reconfirming Augustine's and Aquinas's key insight into sin as an entailment of both man's wounded will and his propensity to intellectual error; one begets the other.

Hence, the hedonistic and covetous practices that came to define modern, secular, and "post-civic" man (as Pocock has termed it) were not so much *originated* as merely *unleashed* and *legitimated* by the triumph of instrumental reason in the era of modern political economy. Symptomatic of what John Paul II has called "structures of sin," and of particular relevance to arguments I will unfold later, is the increasing stigmatization and eventual criminalization of poverty after 1700, and the consequent, dramatic erosion of human solidarity.⁵ Until the late seventeenth century, poverty (not to be confused with outright destitution) had not only been

⁴ See: Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 93–119; Stephen Gaukroger, *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1210–1685* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 157–253; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard-Belknap, 2006), 90–145; John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 26–47; Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Intellectual Traditions, Human Agency, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 160–82.

⁵ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* [SRS] (1987), §36.

the material reality for most people across Europe, which on a global scale remains the case even now; it had also been considered a legitimate, indeed a spiritually dignified condition. Drawing on the regimen of material and spiritual self-humbling pioneered by third-century desert monasticism and codified in Benedict's *Regula*, the ideal of poverty was revived by Francis of Assisi, Thomas à Kempis, the followers of the *Devotio Moderna* in the low countries, as well as other late-medieval mystics and religious movements. Their insistence that our material existence ought in all respects reflect and be ordered toward the overarching good of a beatific vision was influentially contested for the first time by John Calvin and John Knox (*vide* Weber's controversial thesis) and, subsequently, displaced by the rise of sentimentalism as the new paradigm of moral reasoning, particularly in Richardson, Rousseau, and Smith, among others. This is not to deny that expressions of contempt vis-à-vis the poor have likely been a feature of human society since time immemorial and, as the prologue to Chaucer's "Man of Law Tale" shows, also informed a new "realist" tone in fourteenth-century literature. Yet the systematic isolation and criminalization of the poor, culminating in the abolition of the poor laws and the introduction of compulsory labor in work-houses around 1800, shows how a utilitarian conception of social order had effectively supplanted older models of charity and compassion.⁶

Once an ethos of humility and cooperation was replaced, in the wake of the Reformation, by essentially competitive forms of economic behavior—such as when Parliamentary Acts of Enclosure transformed the common lands that had been the foundation of cooperative subsistence farming into the new commodity of "real estate"—the once noble ideal of "poverty," with its time-honored ethos of communal solidarity and local improvisation, came to be redefined as the moral failing of a distinct social group now known as "the poor."⁷ A strictly instrumental model

⁶ See Smith's revealingly entitled chapter "Of the Effects of Prosperity and Adversity upon the Judgment of Mankind with regard to the Propriety of Action," in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759; pt. 1, no. 3), and his early formulation of a utilitarian theory of moral action in pt. 4 of the same work; see also "Virtue without Agency: Sentiment, Behavior, and Habituation in A. Smith," in Pfau, *Minding the Modern*, 327–73.

⁷ On the abrupt revaluation and aggressive stigmatization of poverty as a moral failing on the part of "the poor," unfolding in the 1780s and 1790s across England, see: Mitchell Dean, *The Constitution of Poverty: towards a Genealogy of Liberal Governance* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 18–105; Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 60–141, and Karl Polanyi's classic *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957),

of rationality came to define modern, secular *homo economicus*, whose “reason” now became convertible with his “interest.” No longer intelligible in terms of *action* grounded in reflective judgment and responsible choice, the economic practices now shaping the modern *saeculum* instead take the form of strictly calculative, quasi-feral *behavior*, cued by an instinct for economic opportunity and fueled by a desire for unlimited acquisition.⁸

That said, my contention that received forms of social praxis and the ethical values undergirding them tend to shift often well *before* the development in question becomes an object of intellectual comprehension and moral (re)legitimation does not necessarily commit us to a Hegelian position. In fact, this persistent asymmetry between praxis and knowledge that, in a fine Augustinian turn of phrase, Samuel Taylor Coleridge calls “a mysterious diversity between the injunction of the mind and the elections of the will” ought not to be framed as an epistemological puzzle, but more fundamentally attests to humankind’s disposition to sin.⁹ Hence, it is no coincidence that one of Catholicism’s most significant and enduring responses to modernity’s secular and rapacious anthropology—its ethic of

3–80. Arguably, the eighteenth-century’s most vituperative and influential indictments of the poor were those by Jeremy Bentham and Thomas Malthus, especially the latter’s *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, first published anonymously in 1798, and then, vastly expanded and with the author’s name, in 1803 (recently: ed. Quentin Skinner [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992]). The latter edition marks the displacement of the Judeo-Christian view of “procreation” by the naturalistic language of “reproduction,” Malthus (a member of the Anglican clergy) drew a sharp rebuke from his Church when suggesting that actions long qualified as “vicious” (e.g., prostitution, abortion, infanticide) whose “general tendency . . . is to produce misery, . . . in their immediate or individual effects, may produce perhaps exactly the contrary” (1992, 24, note 6); see also Thomas Pfau, *Wordsworth’s Profession: Form, Class, and the Logic of Romantic Cultural Production* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 341–62. Few figures better illustrate the antagonism between a metaphysical and a naturalistic account of human flourishing than Malthus, who signally fails to recognize his own abandonment of a normative-realist ethic for a consequentialist one. Yet precisely “*how we conceive utility . . . depends on our prior formation and commitments, so that it cannot provide a standard independent of them*” (Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: an Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016], 77; italics mine).

⁸ The distinction between (intelligible) action and (unreflective) behavior is anticipated by Aquinas, who distinguishes between *actus humanus* and *actus hominis*, with the latter not involving moral choice and responsibility, even as it is accomplished by a human being; see Rocco Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła: the Thought of the Man Who Became Pope John Paul II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 126.

⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 349.

solidarity grounded in the dignity of the human person—refutes modern secularism’s most cherished axioms, namely, moral and intellectual *autonomy*, and its wholly immanent and naturalistic outlook on human existence.

Into the Post-Realist Void: Tabulating the Conceptual Losses of Secular Modernity

At this point, we need to broaden our perspective by taking three successive steps. First, in highly compressed form, let us tabulate at least some of the ways in which practices associated with classical liberalism and modern capitalism progressively atrophied the intellectual and spiritual framework that had defined medieval and early modern culture. For strategic reasons, special emphasis will be placed on shifts that ended up distorting, if not eclipsing outright, the relational concept of the human person as modeled for us by the Trinity. Second, accepting as fact (not to be reargued here) that by the late nineteenth century the British system of financial and entrepreneurial capitalism had metastasized to all of Western, still nominally Christian, society and, by then, had effectively become the global norm, we must ask: how did the Catholic intellectual tradition respond to these developments, and what aspects of Catholicism’s contestation of secular modernity during the past century and a half still hold lessons for us today? Third, we must inquire into the success or failure of Catholicism’s comprehensive response to a secular modernity. Yet here I shall argue that it is still too soon to make a judgment, because Catholicism’s most essential test may only now be upon us. For only over the past couple of decades, that is, at the start of what is now called the Anthropocene—when “man has discover[ed] his capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world”—has humanity had to confront in earnest the spiritual, intellectual, and material devastation of both the human person and the world that God freely gifted to humanity—a devastation that to a significant extent has been perpetrated by modern political economy for the past twelve generations or so.¹⁰ We shall return to this issue later.

Many of the challenges confronted by the Catholic intellectual tradition for the past two centuries resulted from the emerging, closely intertwined languages of political economy and moral theory that, starting in the mid-eighteenth century sought to explain and legitimate the already

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* [CA] (1991), §37. The Pope here notes that, in so remaking the world in its own transient image, the human species of the Anthropocene “forgets that this is always based on God’s prior and original gift of the things that are, . . . as though the earth did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray.”

widespread practices of entrepreneurial capitalism and speculative finance that had leapt onto the scene following the establishment of a system of public credit in the 1690s. As I have argued elsewhere, this process at first atrophied and, in time, explicitly repudiated basic concepts long deemed indispensable for achieving a comprehensive and responsible perspective on human existence.¹¹ Among those fundamental concepts whose unraveling may alternatively be considered a symptom or a cause of secularization are the following.

The Disaggregation of Will and Reason

The conceptualist parsing of God's omnipotence (*potentia absoluta*) and his created order (*potentia ordinata*), that is, of will and *logos*, can be observed as early as Ockham's *Quodlibetals*. In time, a strictly non-cognitive understanding of the will was formulated by Martin Luther (*On the Bondage of the Will*). It informed Hobbes' characterization of the will as "the last appetite" and of reason as sheer interested computation ("reckoning"), and it culminated in Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's conception of the will as a wholly opaque *ens metaphysicum*.

The Shift from a Realist to a Heuristic Conception of Teleology and the Displacement of Final Causation

The rise of mechanistic explanatory models (e.g., Pierre Gassendi, Robert Boyle, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke) and the monopoly status accorded to efficient causation have rendered the Platonic and Christian concepts of reason (*logos*) and intelligible order (*kosmos*) inoperative. Knowledge of creation no longer unfolds as our loving "participation" (*methexis*) in it, but as the ascription of complex, albeit inherently mindless, causal mechanisms to it. Efficient causation is increasingly construed as a quantum of physical "force" projected onto passive matter, such that in our modern, mechanist "understanding of nature, the least intelligent has become the most intelligible, the least reasonable the most rational."¹² By the early eighteenth century, the Aristotelian conception of life as an *entelechy* had become attenuated, first as a cosmological hypothesis (Gottfried Leibniz) and eventually as but a heuristic fiction (Kant).¹³ Hence, the Aristote-

¹¹ See Pfau, *Minding the Modern*, 9–75.

¹² Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 69; for an earlier, influential version of this argument, see Edmund Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences* (1935).

¹³ On the changing conceptions of teleology in pre-modern, metaphysical and modern, secular thought, see Robert Spaemann and Reinhard Löw, *Natürliche*

lian-Thomist teleological framework in which moral deliberation, judgment, and choice, guided by the operation of the moral and intellectual virtues, are intrinsically ordered toward a normative, supreme good was supplanted by a prudential concept of “decision.” Progenitors of this incipiently algorithmic model—which conflates rationality with the pursuit of self-interest—include Hobbes, Bernard Mandeville, and Joseph Priestley; and their heirs can still be found among the proponents of so-called “rational-choice theory” today.

The Shift from a Spiritual to a Chronometric Conception of Time

Related to this shift toward a materialist and mechanistic view of human agency, we can observe the displacement of Christianity’s multidimensional conception of time (ordinary, liturgical, contemplative, eschatological, etc.) by a chronometric, existential notion of time as invariant *durée*, untethered from eternity and incessantly subdividing into the no-longer and the not-yet. Hence, with Christianity’s overarching, eschatological conception of human time (*sub specie aeternitatis*) fading from view, so does the spiritual significance of the present. Another significant casualty of this development is the dynamic concept of Tradition that Catholicism had evolved since the early patristic era.¹⁴

The Naturalistic Redefinition of the Human Person

The ascendancy of seventeenth-century mechanism flagged above also caused the concept of “intelligible action” to be supplanted by quasi-mech-

Ziele: Geschichte und Wiederentdeckung des teleologischen Denkens (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2005), esp. 81–122, and Thomas Pfau, “Romantic Bildung and the Persistence of Teleology,” in *Brill’s Companion to German Romantic Philosophy*, ed. Elizabeth Millán Brusslan and Judith Norman (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 143–72. On modern economic theories of rational behavior, see MacIntyre, who notes how, within the Chicago School of economics, “nothing turns on how a particular agent may have arrived at her or his preferences. . . . To be rational [simply] is to be a consistent maximizer of preference satisfaction, . . . a view of practical rationality deeply at odds with the accounts advanced by Aristotle and Aquinas” (*Ethics*, 102).

¹⁴ See: Taylor, *Secular Age*, 54–61 (on the “gathering and re-ordering of secular time”); Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Das Ganze im Fragment* (Einsiedeln, CH: Johannes Verlag, 1990) 17–59, and *A Theological Anthropology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 1–42. See especially Balthasar’s fine discussion of Max Scheler’s account of “conversion” (*Bekehrung*) and “remorse” (*Reue*) as effectively implying the “a reversibility of time” (Das Ganze, 54, and *Theological Anthropology*, 35); and Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 2nd ed., trans. Michael Waldstein and Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press), 1988, 104–12 and 181–90.

anistic theories of “behavior” as the (supposedly) predictable result of some input–output ratio.¹⁵ The shift from responsible choice and intelligible (moral) *action* to reflexively mimetic *behavior* can already be observed in Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*; by the middle of the nineteenth century, literary and theological writings of a wide variety began to tabulate the spiritual and social damage wrought by the Enlightenment’s mimetic conception of personhood and socialization. The resulting spiritual and psychological desiccation of the human person also shaped a wide variety of intellectual and fictional plots, such as we find them articulated by Gustave Flaubert, George Eliot, John Henry Newman, Leo Tolstoy, Vladimir Soloviev, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Theodor Fontane.

The Disaggregation of “Conscience” from Truth

A logical consequence of Luther’s solifidian theology, seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century denominationalism continued to oppose the Catholic conception of faith grounded in a sacramental order and a normative ecclesiology as it had been articulated and refined in some fifteen-hundred years’ worth of theological reflection and magisterial pronouncements.¹⁶ Intimately entwined with broader currents of secularization, the fragmented landscape of Enlightenment denominationalism in particular was characterized by a weak ecclesiology, a still weaker or altogether absent concept of sacramentality, and a wholly subjective notion of “belief.” Having received programmatic expression in Locke’s writings on toleration, religious culture increasingly pivoted on “private judgment” and an eighteenth-century culture of “enthusiasm” found in German Pietism and English Methodism. With spiritual life becoming progressively untethered from a realist metaphysics that had conceived God as *logos*, ostensibly “private” and sentimental conceptions of “belief” flourished alongside the deregulated economic passions of modern, “post-civic” man. Increasingly, private judgment and a supposedly infallible personal conscience became the sole arbiters of religious meaning, which now unfolds seemingly independent of any metaphysical, normative foundations. Within the immanent frame of modern liberal-secular life, conscience no longer furnishes “the redemptive road to truth, . . . [but

¹⁵ On the concept of “intelligible action” as taking logical precedence over “behavior,” see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 208–09.

¹⁶ On Luther’s problematic equation of faith with justification, see Paul Hacker, *Faith in Luther: Martin Luther and the Origin of Anthropocentric Religion* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2017), 8–36 and 83–93.

instead] becomes the justification for subjectivity, which would not like to have itself called into question.”¹⁷

The Shift from a Communio of Persons to a Society of Individuals

The pre-modern framework of *communio* grounded in charity and in what John Paul II elaborates under the heading of “solidarity” had been understood to be eternally modeled for humankind by the Trinity, visibly expressed in the *corpus mysticum* of the Church. Following earlier, skeptical or pragmatic conceptions of political life as essentially separate from a normative order (Niccolò Machiavelli, Michel de Montaigne, Hobbes), the *communio* model at the heart of (Catholic) Christianity was implicitly or overtly challenged by secular, social-contract theories advanced by Locke, Rousseau, and Hume. What Michael Oakeshott has described as a pervasive shift from purposeful “civil association grounded in moral practice” to a strictly contingent “enterprise association”—that is, a polity comprised of hermetically constituted, self-interested individuals—effectively abolished the relational, *imago dei* conception of the human person.¹⁸

**Four Paradigmatic Responses to Secularity:
Tradition, Analogia, Liturgy, Personalism**

The Catholic response to the practical and intellectual decreation of man and world since the seventeenth century has taken many forms. Let me

¹⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 16 and 21–22: conscience thus is reduced to “a pseudo-rational certainty, a certainty that has in fact been woven from self-righteousness, conformity, and lethargy. . . . The reduction of conscience to subjective certitude betokens at the same time a retreat from truth.” See also John Henry Newman’s critique of “private judgment” in his eponymous 1841 essay (newmanreader.org/works/essays/volume2/private.html). For a particularly strident account of this development, see Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2012), 74–128 and 180–233; for a critical reading of Gregory, see Thomas Pfau, “‘Botched Execution’ or Historical Inevitability: Conceptual Dilemmas in Brad S. Gregory’s *The Unintended Reformation*,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 46, no. 3 (2016): 603–28.

¹⁸ See Michael Oakeshott, *Of Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 60–61: “A moral practice is not a prudential art concerned with the success of the enterprises of agents; it is not instrumental to the achievement of any substantive purpose or to the satisfaction of any substantive want. . . . It is concerned with the act, not the event; with agents as doers making an impact upon one another and not in respect of the particular wants for which they are seeking satisfaction.” The following pages (70–78) suggest that Oakeshott’s project involves a qualified retrieval of virtue ethics.

identify four areas in which Catholicism's intervention seems both particularly cohesive and consequential, all of which also turn out to be interconnected in ways that cannot, however, be unfolded in requisite detail here.

The first shift concerns Catholicism's reappraisal of Tradition, a process that gathered momentum by the mid-nineteenth century and that unfolded in two distinct ways: first, as an inward turn that had Catholicism reexamine and deepen the scope of its theological and intellectual resources; and, second, as a concerted effort to engage a *saeculum* disfigured by economic greed, ideological strife, and the commodification of the human person. As regards the first, it can be fairly said that in one way or another, the Catholic response to secularization was only made possible by a concurrent, profound rethinking and broadening of the concept of Tradition. The project gets underway with Newman's *Essay on the Development of Doctrine* (1845) and related efforts such as those of the Tübingen Catholic School (Johann Adam Möhler, Johann Sebastian von Drey). Their understanding of Tradition as a dynamic "development" not only rejected the liberal-Protestant historicism project of overcoming and containing Christianity as past matter; they also sought to break free of a neo-Thomism that, toward the end of the century, was increasingly experienced as arid and inert. Newman's conception of tradition as a progressively deeper and fuller understanding of Christianity's far-flung sources was carried forward by Maurice Blondel, whose *Letters on History and Dogma* (1904) may be read as a manifesto of sorts for the *ressourcement* theology of Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Joseph Ratzinger. Ambitious editorial projects, such as Edward Bouverie Pusey's *Library of the Fathers* (50 vols. published between 1838 and 1881) and de Lubac's and Daniélou's monumental *Sources Chrétiennes* (some 580 vols. published since 1943) provide the Catholic retrieval of Tradition with a textual foundation of unprecedented scope and depth.

A second cluster of responses to secular modernity has involved reaffirming the central and indispensable role of metaphysics for theology and philosophy and, in particular, reviving and deepening the concept of *analogia* (in the work of Erich Przywara, Gottlieb Söhngen, von Balthasar) as the most compelling antidote to modern rationalism's view of the natural world as inert and dumb *res extensa* passively awaiting the imprint of human desire. Crucially, the *analogia* model posits that visible phenomena are not only formally related to the invisible as the metaphysical source of their existence, but that by their distinctive mode of appearance they also actively participate *in* their divine source. On this view, "the world is itself invested with meaning, ethical purpose, and intelligibility, of which it cannot be rationally divested. . . . However, the world invested with such

meaning, purpose, and intelligibility is itself suggestive of a higher and more mysterious *logos*, or reason, that underlies the creation and has given it being out of love.”¹⁹ What the metaphysics of *analogia* fundamentally rejects is the supposition “that visible being could intelligibly manifest itself without being indexed to an anterior concept of form”; not until the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century did such a “rendering accidental the relation of each thing to its own form” even become conceivable.²⁰ Most crucially, perhaps, the concept of *analogia* also presents us with a metaphysical ethic in that it enjoins humanity to respond to creation as a gift to be honored, loved, and passed on—which is to say, to relate to creation as guardians rather than consumers.

A third cluster of responses to secular modernity involves the liturgical movement that took shape after the cataclysm of World War I and found rich and enduring expression in the writings of Romano Guardini, de Lubac, von Balthasar, and Ratzinger (with Newman’s *Tracts for the Times* as important precursor texts). Its abiding significance is at least threefold: first, by drawing attention to the liturgy’s eschatological significance, the movement countered the modern, secular devaluation of time as but empty *durée* and as an essentially fungible commodity. Ratzinger specifically emphasizes how “the liturgy gives precise expression to [our] historical . . . ‘between-ness,’” that is, to our inhabiting the provisional “time of images”; by mediating the redeemer “through earthly signs,” the symbolic structure of the liturgy effects a “kind of *turning* around of

¹⁹ Thomas Joseph White, O.P., “Introduction,” in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or Wisdom of God?*, ed. Thomas Joseph White, O.P., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 27.

²⁰ Michael Hanby, “Creation as Aesthetic Analogy,” in White, *Analogy of Being*, 341–78, at 355. The *analogia* framework furnishes a particularly vivid illustration of the continuity between Platonist thought and Christianity. Thus, the great scholar of the Platonist tradition, Werner Beierwaltes, points out: “However dispersed it is into manifold, finite being, the world never degenerates into a diffuse, aimless array of contradictions, nor into some caricature of the archetype [*Zerrbild des Ur-Bildes*], which would constitute—as a radical dualism of the Gnostic variety maintains—a mere perversion of all positive predicates adhering to the first Principle. Instead, the empirical world preserves within its own realm and in a unique modality [*auf eigentümliche Weise*] what it has received from the intelligible domain. Hence, even as we may speak of two discrete worlds, their difference [*Verschiedenheit*] is nevertheless ‘relativized,’ not only because an equivalent relationship between the two but also an active *participation* [*Teilhabe*] of the phenomenal in the intelligible world is being maintained. . . . For every singular being there is, within the realm of the intelligible, its founding idea” (*Denken des Einen* [Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2016], 85; translation mine).

exitus to reditus.”²¹ Second, by showing how “the prayers of the liturgy are entirely governed and interwoven with dogma” and thus seek “humility by renunciation,” the liturgy offers the dissociated modern individual the gift of participating in a trans-historical and supra-personal community of Truth and experiencing “release from the thralldom of individual caprice.” Third, through “the united body of the faithful as such—the Church—a body which infinitely outnumbers the mere congregation” and by saying “not ‘I’ but ‘We,’” the liturgical movement affirmed the primacy of *communio*—comprised of both clergy and laity—over the dissociated sensibility of the modern, liberal-secular “self.”²² More recently, Ratzinger has developed that point further by arguing that, already in Paul’s letters, the filial identity of Christ with God becomes the blueprint for an ontological understanding of brotherhood that “points beyond the act of *will* involved in election toward a union which involves our very being.”²³ As a reality anterior to any historically contingent, social-contract type of association, Christian brotherhood arises—and is modeled for us—in the event of grace, Christ’s becoming man and sacrificing himself for humanity—that is, grace unconditionally received, commemorated, and affirmed in the sacramental and incarnational order of the liturgy.

The final instance of Catholicism’s comprehensive response to our secular modernity, and the one to be considered in more detail here, returns us to a question already broached above, namely, whether and to what extent Catholicism’s response to the secularization of reason that had manifestly denatured both man and creation was successful, and what role Catholic social teaching in particular may play in the future. At stake here is the distinctive synthesis of Thomism and phenomenology that has informed Catholic thinking about the human person and community throughout much of the twentieth century and into the

²¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 60–61. As he later remarks, the liturgy presents to us “Christ himself [as] the bridge between time and eternity. . . . Now the Eternal One has taken time to himself. In the Son, time co-exists with eternity. God’s eternity is not mere time-lessness, the negation of time, but a power over time [*Zeitmächtigkeit*] that is really present with time and in time” (92).

²² Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. Ada Lane (New York: Herder & Herder, 1998), 19–23, 36, 39.

²³ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 32. As Ratzinger goes on to note, it is by “being incorporated/embodied in Christ [*Einverleibung in Christus*],” principally in Baptism and recurrently in the Eucharist, that the sacramental structure of the liturgy impresses on us an ontological, rather than biological, understanding of kinship (50).

twenty-first.²⁴ More than the other Catholic movements just sketched, the twin projects of personalism and *communio* theology have furnished a resource at once intellectually compelling and materially effective in a modern world that had acquiesced in its own desecration by either surrendering or rejecting outright the fundamental moral and intellectual concepts sketched in the first section above. In part, the superior impact of personalism and *communio* theology stems from the uncommonly direct and vivid ways in which they bring metaphysical insight to bear on conceiving of an ethical and sustainable model of human community today—be it comprised of Christians, other faith groups, or indeed those with no particular faith at all.

That Catholicism's account of person and community (as developed by Blondel, Max Scheler, Jacques Maritain, and Robert Spaemann, among others) should have had such enduring and conspicuous resonance for the past century is in no small part due to the larger-than-life pastoral and intellectual persona of Karol Wojtyła, in particular the way that he mobilized this intellectual tradition so as to revive and deepen Catholic social teaching, to which Leo XIII had given such forceful, programmatic expression. In passing, we note the curiously inverse relationship between the evolution of secularity and Catholic responses to it. Whereas the unleashing of economic self-interest after 1700 initially unfolded in pragmatic and, for the most part, adventitious ways that would receive conceptual legitimation well after the fact, Catholicism's response to a morally and materially deregulated modern *saeculum* proceeds from a comprehensive reexamination of its own rich traditions of moral and intellectual reasoning (sketched above), an undertaking whose practical significance and global impact would not fully reveal itself until the mid-twentieth century.

Let us briefly recall some conceptual features of personalism as we find them in the work of Maritain and, especially, that of Wojtyła. Consistent with "existentialist" inflection of the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition, Maritain distinguishes "between *individuality* and *personality*," with the individual, or soul, understood as the very form of the body and, thus, inseparable from it. Even so, taken "as an individual, each of us is a fragment of a species" and, thus, defined by "the immense web of cosmic, ethical, historical forces and influences—and bound by their laws."²⁵ Hence,

²⁴ On phenomenology's origins in Catholic thought and its response to neo-Thomism, see Edward Baring, *Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 23–54.

²⁵ Jacques Maritain, *Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 33, 38. On Maritain's consid-

freedom and our spiritual destiny toward which it points are the province not of the human being understood as a species, but of the human person, that is, “the subsistence of the spiritual soul communicated to the human composite.” In attesting “to the generosity or expansiveness in being, . . . personality, of its essence, requires a dialogue in which souls really communicate.” Whereas sociality may indeed be understood as a preferential option of the individual, “community”—being integral to our spiritual flourishing—is constitutive of personhood. As Maritain notes, “personality tends by nature to communion,” and the “common good is received in persons, each one of whom is a mirror of the whole.”²⁶ Maritain’s distinction between “the common good of *human persons*” and the flourishing of societies—such as interpreted by mid-twentieth-century totalitarianism—resonates strongly in Wojtyła’s account of the human person. While that framework can only be taken up in cursory form here, it bears recalling some of its basic tenets, since they would anchor pronouncements on the dignity of the human person, solidarity, and community subsequently found in the social encyclicals of John Paul II.

As early as 1951, in an essay closely related to his dissertation on faith in John of the Cross, Wojtyła notes: “To the extent that the human person consciously grasps his own interiority he palpably encounters the sphere of Grace. God not only shows Himself as above and beyond, but also *within* [the person] as the one who continually forms and at the same time transcends human interiority.”²⁷ For Wojtyła, the ontological reality of Divine Grace and transcendence finds its phenomenological analogue in the self-transcendence that defines the acting person. To act—deliberatively, purposefully, and responsibly—is to experience one’s personhood as both constituted by and participating in the reality of God. To be sure, every human act constitutes an instance of self-creation and self-authorization that is often understood in strictly immanent ways. Considered on strictly *formal* grounds, that is to say, “‘I act’ means ‘I am the efficient cause’ of

erable influence in shaping the modern concept of human rights as enshrined in the 1945 United Nations Charter, see Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 65–100.

²⁶ Maritain, *Person and the Common Good*, 41–42, 47, 49. As Maritain goes on to note, “the common good is not only a system of advantages and utilities but also a rectitude of life, an end, good in itself, . . . a *bonum honestum*”; hence, “the human person’s vocation to goods which transcend it is embodied in the essence of the common good” (53, 64).

²⁷ Karol Wojtyła “Humanism in John of the Cross” (1951), quoted in Wojtyła, *Was ist der Mensch?* trans. and ed. Hanns-Gregor Nissing (Munich: Pneuma, 2011), xxvii (translation mine).

my self-actualization as a [personal] subject.” Yet such a formal description only signifies if we understand human action as embedded within a horizon of values and goods from which a specific act (and our account of it) derives its intelligibility. Hence, as Wojtyła is quick to point out, “the concept of self-determination involves more than just the concept of efficacy.”²⁸

Human action not only effects determinate change within the ambient world but, concurrently, *authorizes* the agent *as a person*. Following Aquinas, Wojtyła understands act and being as intimately entwined, such that to *do* good or evil means *eo ipso* to create oneself as a good or evil *being*. Action not only seeks to realize a concrete object of will, but in its very performance also reveals the moral status of its agent: “[Action] brings to light the particular composition that is proper to me as a person.” It is this revelatory dimension of the human act that prompts Wojtyła to align action with self-transcendence. Revealed by action in general, most conspicuously in “decisions of conscience,” is the ontological fact that “as persons [we] fulfill ourselves by going beyond ourselves toward values accepted in truth and realized . . . with a deep sense of responsibility.”²⁹ Unsurprisingly, Wojtyła rejects the hermetic and non-cognitive understanding of agency that can be traced back to fourteenth-century voluntarism. In fact, he insists, “neither self-determination nor self-possession . . . implies being closed in on oneself.” Quite the obverse, in fact, is the case in that the will, understood as a rational appetite, “impl[ies] a special disposition [on the part of the acting person] to make a ‘gift of oneself.’” Alluding to *Gaudium et Spes*, Wojtyła thus remarks that “only if one can determine oneself . . . can one also become a gift for others.”³⁰

Not only, however, does Wojtyła reject the voluntarist model of act and agent as unconstrained by the *logos*; he also demurs at Kant’s more guarded, formalist understanding of volition as “spontaneity.” For any spontaneity of willing can only ever “appear in man as a ‘necessity’ of choosing among

²⁸ Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok, O.S.M. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 189, 192.

²⁹ Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, 215. As Wojtyła puts it elsewhere, “through an act [performed in accordance with conscience] I become, and am, good as a man. The moral value reaches to the entire depth of the metaphysical structure of the human subject” (“The Person: Subject and Community,” *Review of Metaphysics* 33, no. 2 [1979]: 273–308, at 286).

³⁰ Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, 194. See also Wojtyła’s considered rejection of a “certain solipsism” to which his concept of action as moral self-determination might at first glance seem to give rise (“The Transcendence of the Person in Action and Man’s Self-Teleology,” *Annalecta Husserliana* 9 [1979]: 203–12, at 206).

values and deciding.” The “values which correspond to [spontaneous willing]” are not created by the human act but are antecedent to it; they themselves “constitute the peculiar material of choice and decision proper to the will.”³¹ Echoing positions previously developed by Scheler and Roman Ingarden, Wojtyła insists that a strictly hermetic, formal notion of action fails to recognize the person’s “living contact with the whole reality, . . . with the world of values, hierarchized and differentiated within itself.” Precisely because “willing by nature refers to value, it is never constituted in the subject and in consequence does not appear in consciousness except for this reference.” Hence:

It is not the willing itself as an intentional turning toward values that constitutes the dynamic essence of the act, but the determining of one’s self, or in other words self-determination, which engages the personal subject in a manner proper to himself. And so the true *voluntarium* is not contained in the very experience of willing something, but in the experience of determining oneself.³²

Still, such an account of “self-transcendence” in action, whereby a member of the human species determines him- or herself as a person, as *someone* rather than *something*, remains incomplete as long as we think of self-determination only in “horizontal” terms.³³ Indeed, once we acknowledge

³¹ While “some realists are disturbed by [Wojtyła’s] use of the term ‘value’ in discussions of the good,” Kenneth Schmitz notes that “the term is shorn of its merely subjectivist sense” and, instead, “proposes a truth that is constituted by the good” (*At the Center of the Human Drama: the Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła / Pope John Paul II* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press], 56). Kevin Doran points to Scheler’s critique of Kant’s concept of value as strictly subjective and notional, rather than interpersonal and act-based, as a major influence on Wojtyła (*Solidarity: A Synthesis of Personalism and Communalism in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła / Pope John Paul II* [New York: Peter Lang, 1996], 30–34).

³² Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, 205–06. On the “auto-teleological structure of the human act,” see Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 282–83. On Wojtyła’s act-based concept of the human person, see Doran, *Solidarity*, 125–41, and the detailed readings of *Person and Act* by Miguel Acosta and Adrian Reimers in *Karol Wojtyła’s Personalist Philosophy: Understanding Person & Act* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 105–243, and Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła*, 117–76.

³³ On this foundational distinction, see Robert Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference between “Someone” and “Something,”* trans. Oliver O’Donovan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), esp. 5–33 and 62–80. Echoing Wojtyła, Spaemann notes here that “the conception of being as an act befalling an entity raises the logical

that the human being's act of moral self-determination as a person unfolds within an antecedently given framework of moral norms, it follows that the values affirmed by an agent's judgment and choice cannot be functions of subjective preference, but are ontologically given. As Wojtyła notes: "Each choice or mature willing of a definite value presupposes an objective reference to truth. . . . [Hence] the reference to truth, which in the case of the conscience is, above all, the truth of the good (or about the good), indicates a different dimension of the transcendence proper to a person than that which is expressed in the very transcending of the horizontal limit of the subject."³⁴

What Wojtyła calls "vertical transcendence" is *prima facie* experienced by the individual person through her participation in a community. His contention that, in the *actus humanus*, an agent "actualizes those potentialities which are proper to him insofar as he is a person, . . . [and] to some extent creates himself" delineates the metaphysical implications of his phenomenological method. That is, to be an agent not only involves contingent projections of our will but, anterior to it, the recognition of the person's "ontological kernel." The act does not constitute the very *being* of the human subject as such, but instead realizes its potential.³⁵ It thus confronts the agent with her anterior givenness, the very gift of being through which her transcendent orientation is *prima facie* revealed. In his long, programmatic essay "The Person: Subject and Community," Wojtyła acknowledges that his major philosophical work, *The Acting Person* (1969) did "not sufficiently elaborate the theory of community." It is no coinci-

difficulty that the entity is presumed to be already *there* in some sense." Spaemann continues that "the 'metaphysical realism' that characterizes our relation to other persons . . . is no pure subject-object relation, and a situation *vis-à-vis* reality is always and at the same time a relation of 'coexistence'; metaphysical realism does not as such favor a specific epistemological stance but, being a more elemental stance, 'amounts simply to this: if we cannot transcend appearance and get through to the being that reveals and conceals itself, there can be no persons. For persons are themselves beings that reveal and conceal themselves. They are not simply subjects in a 'subject-object relation'; they are essentially subject and object at once" (79).

³⁴ Wojtyła, "The Transcendence of the Person," 207. What Wojtyła here distinguishes as a "vertical" transcendence reveals the constant operation of the natural law within human agents. As he puts it elsewhere, we "must grasp correctly *the transcendental character* of that law along with its simultaneous *immanence* in man and in the world. . . . The natural law is inscribed in the very being of man" (*Man in the Field of Responsibility*, trans. Kenneth W. Kemp and Zuzanna Maslanka-Kieron [South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2011], 71).

³⁵ Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła*, 135–36.

dence, then, that following Wojtyła's election as pope, the publication of this essay in 1979 should have been succeeded by his three groundbreaking social encyclicals: *Laborem Exercens* [LE] (1981), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* [SRS] (1987), and *Centesimus Annus* [CA] (1991). Already in his 1979 essay, Wojtyła specifies that community cannot be conceived as a mere "plurality of subjects, but always [as] the specific unity of that plurality." Unlike the modern understanding of "society" as a contingent aggregation of individuals based on contingent political and economic interests, a purely "horizontal comradeship" (as Benedict Anderson terms it),³⁶ community is "something more essential, . . . a reality essential to human coexistence and cooperation, and also a fundamental norm."³⁷ Whereas society tends to be construed as a contingent aggregation of individuals holding formally identical claim rights, community is grounded in the mutual recognition of persons as "the indestructible image of God the Creator, which is *identical* in each of us" (SRS §47). Being anterior to the "lateral" domain of historical and material reality, this recognition can never be achieved by economic interaction, nor be legally compelled by the state. Yet neither can it be reduced to a vertical (religious) option or "preference." For, any political and social order that ignores the transcendent dignity of the human person will end up desecrating both the human community and the natural world by subjecting them to a strictly instrumental, means–end rationality.

A Conceptual Framework for a Precarious Future: Person, Solidarity, and *Communio*

John Paul II's *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* opens with a searing indictment of precisely this "fragmentation" of the human community into "First, Second, Third, and even Fourth World" (SRS §17). As he repeatedly notes, authentic "development" involves far more than "the mere accumulation of wealth and the greater availability of goods and services" (SRS §9), or what in secular (economic and political) shorthand is called "progress." In fact, the purely instrumental rationality and material focus at the heart of "progressive" politics—both in the Communist East Block and the liberal-democratic West—risks making "people slaves of 'possession' and imme-

³⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 7.

³⁷ Wojtyła, "The Person: Subject and Community," 288–91. As is the case for the late Coleridge, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas, it is the I–Thou relationship that, for Wojtyła, frames community as a normative, ethical reality rather than a discretionary and contingent situation.

diate gratification" (SRS §28), guaranteeing as it does the "domination of things over people" and life-forms "directed toward 'having' rather than 'being'" (CA §§33, 36). Even before the East–West divide came to an end two years after *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, John Paul II already grasped their shared and ultimately fatal obsession with man's total material dominion over the earth and, consequently, over one another.³⁸ As he notes, it is the essence of dominion over things to redound on the person or community of persons in the grip of such desire: "A person who is . . . no longer able to control his instincts and passions, or to subordinate them by obedience to the truth, cannot be free" (CA §41); and as the current fusion of radical economic neo-liberalism with technologies of digital "tracking" and surveillance has borne out, "the individual today is often suffocated between two poles represented by the State and the marketplace. At times, it seems as though he exists only as a producer and consumer of goods, or as an object of State administration" (CA §49). Hence, he urges, we must never "lose sight of that *dimension* which is in the *specific nature* of man, . . . a bodily and a spiritual nature"; it becomes clear that "development cannot consist only in the use, dominion over, and *indiscriminate* possession of created things . . . but rather in *subordinating* the possession, dominion, and use to man's divine likeness and to his vocation to . . . the *transcendent reality* of the human being" (SRS §29).

Against the "structures of sin" of a world divided and desecrated by rapacious economic practices that manifestly violate the dignity of the human person, John Paul II urges a "*diametrically opposed attitude*: a commitment to the good of one's neighbor with the readiness, in the Gospel sense, to 'lose oneself' for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him" (SRS §38). The concept of "solidarity," which is here introduced, carries both a political and a spiritual meaning, just as a decade earlier Wojtyła had distinguished between "horizontal" and "vertical" self-transcendence.³⁹ On the first plane, solidarity is realized when we "recognize one another as persons," not only within a given society but when entire societies have the moral clarity to "see the 'other'—whether a *person, people or nation*—not as some kind of instrument, . . . to be exploited at

³⁸ John Paul II pointedly rejects a misconstrual of "solidarity" and "communio" as but an alternative policy proposal: "The Church's social doctrine *is not* a 'third way' between *liberal capitalism* and *Marxist collectivism*. . . . Rather, it constitutes *a category of its own*"; precisely because the concepts of solidarity and community are grounded in a personalist ontology, they constitute not an "ideology, but rather that *accurate formulation* of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence" (SRS §41); see also CA §13.

³⁹ On the concept of solidarity in Wojtyła / John Paul II, see Doran, *Solidarity*,

low cost and then discarded,” but as “our ‘neighbor,’ a ‘helper’ (cf. Gen. 2.18–20), to be made a sharer” (SRS §39). For John Paul II, “solidarity is undoubtedly a Christian virtue” (SRS §40), for it reminds us that in our relationship with others what is at stake is not merely our contingent interaction with members of the same species, but our recognition of the other as a person. As Wojtyła had already remarked in *The Acting Person*, “the notion of neighbor differs essentially from what is contained in the notion *member of community*,” for even those who “remain strangers . . . never cease to be neighbors.”⁴⁰ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* reiterates the salient point of a relatedness and moral obligation constitutive of personhood and, as such, antecedent to any political, ethnic, or cultural community: “Beyond human and natural bonds, . . . there is discerned in the light of faith a new *model* of the *unity* of the human race, which must ultimately inspire our *solidarity*. This supreme model of unity, which is a reflection of the intimate life of God, one God in three Persons, is what we Christians mean by the word ‘communion’” (SRS §40).

In closing, let us return to the question previously flagged as regards Catholicism’s response to secular modernity: having been forged by its long-standing confrontation with an increasingly secular and avowedly anti-realist culture, in what ways may the Catholic intellectual tradition provide spiritual, intellectual, and practical guidance to gravely disordered human communities as they struggle to achieve a just, responsible, and meaningful existence within a world that has been suffering massive and potentially irreversible ecological damage. Thirty-two years later, John Paul II’s remarks on humankind’s “radical interdependence and consequently of the need for solidarity” arising out of an awareness of being “linked together by a *common destiny*” (SRS §26) ring even more true and urgent. So, too, does his warning about man’s desire for limitless possession and consumption that, as he foresaw in 1991, was bound to “consume the resources of the earth and his own life” (CA §37). Having evolved over some three hundred years into a global system of production, trade, and speculation callously indifferent to notions of distributive justice and intergenerational responsibility, our secular modernity today appears to have lost sight of an ontological *datum* altogether essential to Christian teaching: namely, that “there are goods which by their very nature cannot and must not be bought or sold.” Such neo-liberal “‘idolatry’ of

⁴⁰ Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. Andrzej Potocki and Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Riedel 1979), 292–93. Due to the lingering questions about the quality of its translation, my remarks here largely bypass Wojtyła’s *magnum opus*, of which a new translation is apparently in progress.

the market" (CA §40)—no less secular and materialistic than the twentieth-century totalitarian regimes it supplanted—has for the past four decades further compounded forms of alienation of which John Paul II speaks so eloquently in *Centesimus Annus*.⁴¹

Long ignored and subsequently accepted as the price to be paid for the triumph of a global system of production and consumption, pervasive human suffering and ecological destruction have only in the last few decades been recognized as a potentially catastrophic and irreversible legacy of secular modernity. With all reputable scientific models now forecasting climate change accelerating in its pace and bound to reach new extremes, the remainder of our century is destined to be shaped by unprecedented levels of population displacement, more frequent and more extreme weather events, patterns of drought and coastal flooding, which in turn is predicted to entail growing food insecurity and deteriorating standards of public health. Already, these trends, exponentially growing in frequency and severity, are putting immense strain on established political and economic institutions (governments, credit systems, regulatory agencies, disaster relief agencies, etc.) historically entrusted with maintaining social stability, ensuring (however selectively) the material flourishing of our secular society, and with remedying or at least containing modernity's more pernicious side-effects.⁴² In many countries these institutions are exhibiting signs of fracturing, due to either unprecedented strain placed on them or political attacks directed against them from without, or because those placed in charge of them have been undermining their core ethos and mission. Indeed, not since the Great Plague, the Black Death, have so many human communities had to confront such material and spiritual dangers, even as their institutional resources are

⁴¹ "Alienation is found . . . when [work] is organized so as to ensure maximum returns and profits with no concern whether the worker, through his own labor, grows or diminishes as a person. . . . When man does not recognize in himself and in others the value and grandeur of the human person, he effectively deprives himself of the possibility of . . . entering into that relationship of solidarity and communion with others for which God created him" (CA §41).

⁴² For a survey of current research and conclusions, see the site United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (<https://www.ipcc.ch/>); for different climate scenarios and probable consequences, see [skepticalscience.com/climate-best-to-worst-case-scenarios.html](https://www.skepticalscience.com/climate-best-to-worst-case-scenarios.html); for the latest gathering of data within the United States, see the Fourth National Climate Assessment (nca2018.global-change.gov/). For an exceptionally powerful and richly informed account of our ecological crisis and what it portends for future human communities, see David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2019).

variously being attacked from without or discredited from within.

Sadly, the list of internally fractured and externally discredited institutions includes the Catholic Church, and in the eyes of not only self-described secularists, but a good deal of the laity too. Let me, then, close with two interlocking observations—one sharply critical and the other one more constructive and hopeful. As regards the first, the immeasurable damage *homo faber* has inflicted on creation cannot be reversed unless the human community charts its future course on the basis of tenets that we find most profoundly and richly developed in the Catholic intellectual tradition, in particular its conception of human solidarity and community grounded in a transcendent and normative conception of the human person. For, as the past three centuries have made horrifically apparent, no purely “horizontal” political framework—of neither the social-contract nor the neo-liberal variety—can on its own ever issue in a responsible and sustainable community. For that to happen, our political and social order must be explicitly grounded in an ontology of the human person, understood as created (not made) and divinely enjoined to realize its ethical and spiritual potential in self-transcendent, active solidarity and communion with other persons. Should the communities of the Anthropocene ignore this framework and rely on strictly pragmatic or technocratic “solutions” to secular modernity’s catastrophic legacy of unrestrained production and consumption, the human community and the creation it was gifted will face global decline and eventual collapse on a scale and of a kind never before experienced.

Now, it is the mission of the Catholic Church and all its affiliated institutions of learning and public advocacy to raise awareness of the normative, moral, and spiritual foundations that humanity has ignored at its own rapidly growing peril for the past several centuries. Yet for that ethical message to resonate loudly and effectively, the Catholic Church must decisively cleanse itself of the stain of abuse and other forms of moral and material corruption. Provided the Church summons the spiritual discernment and institutional will for such a cleansing, yet only then can we expect Catholicism’s humane and intellectually profound social teachings to speak to a world that, more than ever, is in desperate need of them. Only if moral integrity and intellectual clarity have been fully restored to the Church’s social teachings, yet also to its liturgical practice and pastoral care, will it be perceived as a communion *exemplifying* what, as the mystical body of Christ, it was meant to have been all along. And only then can it effectively impress on the dissociated and self-interested (yet also deeply frightened and disoriented) individuals of today’s *saeculum* their ethical responsibility toward themselves and one another. At both an

intellectual and a practical level, a Church cleansed of the sin of abuse and corruption may once again speak forcefully and credibly the core truths that I have sought to sketch above: namely, that the dignity of the human person and the viability of human communities rests on a spiritual ecology, at once normative and fragile. At its heart, this ecology asks us to recognize that the acting person stands in a relation of ethical responsibility not only vis-à-vis other persons and non-fungible goods in the present but also to human beings as yet unborn, and indeed to entire generations as yet unconceived. It is here that the metaphysical foundations of Catholic intellectual tradition reveal a profound link between the contents of the faith and their lucid, if ever incomplete, realization in social and spiritual practice. As the young Joseph Ratzinger put it half a century ago: "Christian belief is not an idea but life; it is, not mind existing for itself, but incarnation, mind in the body of history and its 'We.' It is not the mysticism of the self-identification of the mind with God, but obedience and service: going beyond oneself, freeing the self precisely through being taken into service by something not made or thought out by oneself, the liberation of being taken into service for the whole."⁴³ N.V

⁴³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 100.