

FOREWORD

In his address to the United Nations over ten years ago, John Paul II exhorted men and women throughout the world to build in the new millennium “a civilization worthy of the human person, a true culture of freedom.”¹ The decline in moral and spiritual values both in America and in Europe attests to the urgent need for cultural renewal. We are presently facing not only the threat of terrorism and of fanaticism, but also the challenges to humanity arising from unprecedented technological power.² The future of humankind and of the world stands in peril unless theoretical and practical wisdom is forthcoming. Concerted efforts by people of good will to provide this wisdom are, however, being made, and so there is hope that we can build a better world.

The quest for freedom is one of the distinctive features of our time. Men and women throughout the world have taken “the risk of freedom” in order to lead a life in keeping with their dignity as human persons.³ The twentieth-century philosopher Jacques Maritain, whose work is indebted to Thomas Aquinas and whose influence is evident in the personalist thought of John Paul II, describes the human person in words taken from Aquinas: “The person signifies what is most perfect in all nature—that is, a subsistent individual of a rational nature.”⁴ According to Maritain and the tradition in which he philosophized, human persons are like God in that they have the powers of reason and free will and can thus determine themselves. The great dignity of human persons resides in their freedom, in that capacity for self-determination or self-mastery, whereby they are able in a sense to make or mold themselves, to

-
1. Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly to the United Nations Organization, New York, October 5, 1995. See the Vatican website.
 2. On the great moral challenges of biotechnology, see Leon Kass, “How Brave a New World?” 2007 commencement speech at St. John’s College, in Annapolis, Maryland.
 3. See John Paul II’s address to the United Nations, October 5, 1995.
 4. Jacques Maritain, “The Individual and the Person,” in *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, eds. Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), p. 4. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 29, a. 3, resp.

perfect themselves, and to perfect the world in which they live. When persons act contrary to their dignity and greatness as free beings, then they act slavishly. We are no doubt witnesses to the myriad forms that slavish action can take, whether by means of drugs, sex, the cult of bodily beauty and of physical comfort and well-being, to the detriment of the care of the rational soul.

Authentic freedom cannot be detached from the quest for truth. When freedom is severed from the truth about the human person, then it degenerates into license or into the will to power. History, past and present, provides us with abundant examples of how lawless freedom or absolute autonomy creates havoc in the lives of individuals and in political life. As John Paul II put it: "Freedom has an inner 'logic' which distinguishes it and ennobles it: freedom is ordered to the truth. . . . Far from being a limitation upon freedom or a threat to it, reference to the truth about the human person—a truth universally knowable through the moral law written on the hearts of all—is, in fact, the guarantor of freedom's future."⁵

Since there is such an intimate connection between freedom and the truth about man, we shall find that false freedoms have their origin in false anthropologies. John Paul II recognized that rival versions of politics and culture always start from a particular conception of the human person. Nowhere is this more evident than in contemporary public debates regarding freedom and rights. As Mary Ann Glendon, Harvard Professor of Law, has shown, these debates generally make use of either the libertarian or the dignitarian modes of discourse.⁶ In the libertarian context, rights are generally formulated without reference to limits or to responsibilities; although libertarian freedom has a procedural framework, it lacks a specific normative framework. On the other hand, the dignitarian mode of discourse found, for example, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or in the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, sees rights as

5. See John Paul II's address to the United Nations.

6. In this brief discussion of the libertarian and dignitarian traditions, I am making reference to a more detailed account which appears in Professor Glendon's contribution to a seminar on John Paul II's address to the United Nations. The seminar was held at the Trusteeship Council Chamber of the U.N. on May 8, 1996. Professor Glendon's statement is found on the website of the Holy See Mission.

both safeguarded by fair procedures and as grounded in a normative structure based on personal dignity. In the dignitarian tradition, the uniqueness of each individual is acknowledged, but importance is also given to the ways in which the individual is constituted by his relations to others; individual persons and groups have responsibilities as well as specific rights.

While both of these traditions may be subject to deformation, it is the libertarian tradition in particular which has given way to debased versions: from the debasement of libertarian freedom we have crude power politics, materialism, and hedonism. Reference can also be made to utilitarianism, skepticism, and relativism, which in the final analysis deny the existence of common truths and thus attack the foundation of universal rights. We need to search for the distinct conception of the human person that underlies these different conceptions of rights and freedom. According to Professor Glendon, "That search, in the case of debased libertarianism, leads to 'radically autonomous man,' in the case of utilitarianism, to 'economic man,' and in the case of relativism to 'plastic man'—who, having no nature of his own, can morph into an infinite variety of forms."⁷

Given the connection between freedom and truth, it is evident that a freedom which is not anchored in the truth about the human person will not be used responsibly and will harm both the individual person and society. Furthermore, the dissociation of freedom from truth makes intercultural dialogue on rights impossible. Unless the quest for freedom is grounded in a continuous search for truth, it becomes impossible to discuss the human future intelligibly. At the heart of all wisdom traditions there is the conviction of a common humanity, of a common moral order, that is the basis for our reflection and deliberation about the human future. We must appeal to that "moral logic which is built into human life."⁸ John Paul II expressed it best when he said: "The universal moral law written on the human heart is precisely that kind of 'grammar' which is needed if the world is to engage this discussion of its future."⁹ Our discussion of the future and

7. Ibid.

8. See John Paul II's address to the United Nations.

9. Ibid.

the destiny of humankind can be intelligible because we do not live in an irrational world nor is human life meaningless.

We need a vision of the human person which is more profound and holistic than any of the reductionist anthropologies mentioned above, a vision of the person which recognizes, as Maritain and Aquinas and others have maintained, the inestimable dignity and value of each human life. In consonance with this conception of the person, John Paul II's anthropology presents the human person "as a creature of intelligence and free will, immersed in a mystery-[the mystery of God]-which transcends his own being and endowed with the ability to reflect and the ability to choose-and thus capable of wisdom and virtue."¹⁰ It is precisely these God-given capacities for wisdom and moral virtue, together with divine providence, that will enable us to bring about "a true culture of freedom." Beyond all the cultural differences, there is in effect "a fundamental commonality,"¹¹ an intelligible human nature shared by all peoples, which makes possible dialogue between individuals of different lands. If persuasion by means of reasoned dialogue is to succeed the "violent coercion" of the twentieth century,¹² then appeal must be made to the nature of the person, with its internal moral law and objective demands, as the foundation for universal human rights.

The vision of the human person presented by John Paul II has been called a "transcendent humanism" and stands in sharp contrast to what has been termed an "atheistic humanism" or an "exclusivist humanism."¹³ Not only does the latter exclude from public life all transcendent moral reference points, as is evident in the present cultural crisis of Europe, but it also expresses a truncated version of human reason, what Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, has

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. On "atheistic humanism" see Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, trans. Edith M. Riley, Anne Englund Nash, and Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995). On "exclusive humanism" see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), and on "transcendent humanism" see my article entitled "Foundations for a Christian Anthropology," *Anthropotes*, no. 2 (1989), pp. 225-257.

called the “mutilation of reason.”¹⁴ By limiting reason to the empirical realm, to scientific reason, no reasonable access to religion and to an objective or public morality is possible. In an “exclusivist humanism,” therefore, reason is no longer considered as that human capacity to know the truth of things, including moral truth; it is no longer *capax entis*, *capax Dei*, capable of knowing the whole of being, which is intelligible, and also capable of knowing God. We thus need to reaffirm reason’s capacity to attain the truth, for, as we have seen, human freedom and its responsible use depend on truth.

By broadening the concept of reason, by opening it to the divine, and more specifically to the God of the *Logos*, we will be able to enter into a “dialogue of cultures” and thus work toward ending the many forms of violence perpetrated against the human person.¹⁵ The rediscovery of reason’s metaphysical reach and of a “transcendent humanism” is vital if we wish to create “a civilization worthy of the human person, a true culture of freedom.”

ALICE RAMOS

St. John’s University

14. Joseph Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), p. 43. See also George Weigel’s essay entitled “Is Europe Dying? Notes on a Crisis of Civilizational Morale,” on the website of the American Enterprise Institute.

15. See James V. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007), which also includes in the appendix the lecture given by Pope Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg, September 12, 2006.