



The Religious Sense, Works, and Politics

We offer here Father Giussani's address to an assembly of the Italian Christian Democratic Party in Milan in 1987.

Politics is the most complete form of culture

Since politics is the most comprehensive form of culture, it must have man as its primary concern. In his speech at UNESCO (June 2, 1980) John Paul II said, "Culture is always in an essential and necessary relationship to what man is."¹

Now, the most interesting thing to note is that man is *one* in himself. In that same speech, the Pope says that in culture it is always necessary to consider man "in his totality: in his spiritual and material subjectivity as a complete whole." We must take care "not to superimpose on culture – a truly human system, a splendid synthesis of spirit and body – preconceived divisions and oppositions".²

What determines, what gives shape to this oneness of man, this unity of his "I"? It is that dynamic element that guides his personal and social expression, through the fundamental questions and needs in which it is expressed. In short, we call this dynamic element, which guides man's personal and social expression of his fundamental questions, *his religious sense*; man's unity takes the form of his *religious sense*. This basic factor is expressed in man through questions, promptings, and provocations, personal and social. In the seventeenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, St. Paul explains the great, relentless migration of peoples as a search for God.³

Thus, man's *religious sense* appears as the root from which all value springs. In the end, value is the awareness of the relationship between a part and its whole. Man's responsibility, prompted by all kinds of needs arising from his impact with reality, commits itself to answering those questions posed by his *religious sense* (or the "heart" as the Bible calls it).

Power

Man has to deal with the powers of the world by taking responsibility for these values. By power I mean what Romano Guardini, in his book of the same title, described as the definition of the common goal and organization of things so as to achieve this goal.⁴

Now, either power is determined by the will to serve God's creature in its dynamic development, that is, to serve man, culture and the practices deriving from it, or power tends to reduce human reality to its own aims. Thus a State conceived as the source of all rights relegates man "to a piece of matter, or an anonymous citizen of the earthly city"⁵ as *Gaudium et Spes* puts it.

The tragedy of our time

If power's interest is to serve its own aim, then it must try to control man's desires. For desire is the emblem of freedom since it opens man to the horizon of the possible; whereas the problem of power, understood as I have described it, is to ensure the maximum consensus of the masses whose needs are ever more regulated. Thus man's desires, and therefore his values, are essentially reduced. The reduction of man's desires, of his needs, and therefore of his values, is pursued systematically. Mass media and public education become tools for a relentless indoctrination of certain desires and the obliteration and the ousting of others. In the encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (*Rich in Mercy*), the Pope points out that this is the tragedy of our time: the loss of the freedom of conscience on the part of entire peoples achieved through the cynical use of mass media by those in power.⁶

The Grand Standardization

The landscape of social life is becoming more and more uniform, grey (think of "the grand standardization" of which Pasolini spoke).⁷ I am tempted to describe the situation in the terms I sometimes use with young people: beware lest P (power) be in direct proportion to I (impotence/weakness); in such a case, power becomes tyranny against the weak which is pursued via the systematic reduction of desires, needs, and values.

A passage from an interview with the great Czech writer, Vaclav Belohradsky, in *L'Altra Europa* says, "European tradition means never having to live beyond the bounds of one's conscience, by reducing it to an anonymous apparatus, like the law or the State. This firmness of conscience is the inheritance of the Greek, Christian, and bourgeois tradition. The irreducibility of man's conscience to institutions is under threat in the era of mass media, of totalitarian States, and of the general computerization of society. In fact, it is very easy for us to imagine institutions organized so perfectly as to impose their every action as legitimate. It is enough to have an efficient organization in order to legitimize anything. We could sum up the essence of what threatens us in this way: States are programming their own citizens, industries are programming their consumers, publishing houses are programming their readers,

etc. Little-by-little the whole of society becomes something the State is producing for itself.”⁸

This flattening-out of desire is the origin of bewilderment in the young and cynicism in adults. In the midst of such pervasive lethargy what alternative is there? Suffocating voluntarism with no horizon, with no genius and no space, and moralism advanced by the State as the ultimate source of consistency for human development.

Movements and works

A culture of responsibility must keep man’s original desire alive, from which springs all his desires and values; his relationship with the Infinite that makes the person a true and active subject of history. A culture of responsibility must, of necessity, start from the religious sense. This point of departure brings men together. Starting from the religious sense cannot fail to cause men to join together; not for short-lived gain, but substantially together: to join together in society with a totality and a surprising freedom (the Church is the most exemplary case of this), so that the springing up of movements is a sign of liveliness, of responsibility, and of culture that makes the whole society more dynamic.

It is necessary to note that these movements are incapable of confining themselves to the abstract. In spite of the inertia or the lack of intelligence of those who represent them or participate in them, the movements cannot remain in the abstract, but tend to prove their truth by facing those needs in which man’s desires take flesh, by imagining and creating operative, grassroots, timely organizations that we call “social works”⁹, “forms of new life for man” as John Paul II said at the Meeting in Rimini in 1982¹⁰, re-proposing the Social Doctrine of the Church. Social works represent a real contribution to something new in the fabric and face of society.

Social works generated by an authentic responsibility must be characterized by realism and prudence. Realism highlights the importance of the fact that the foundation of truth is where the intellect conforms to reality;¹¹ whereas prudence, which is defined by St. Thomas in the *Summa* as the right criterion for doing things¹², is measured by the truth of the object rather than by morality, or the ethical aspect of goodness. A social work, precisely because of this need for realism and prudence, becomes a sign of creativity, sacrifice, and openness.

It is, therefore, in the commitment to defend this primacy of free and creative social interaction in the face of power that the strength and the durability of personal responsibility are demonstrated. It is in the primacy of society over the State that the culture of responsibility is safeguarded. The primacy of society, then, should be a fabric

created by vibrant relationships among movements, which, in creating works and associations, constitute *intermediate communities*, thus expressing the freedom of persons empowered by the ability to associate.

The task of politics and of parties

Now I would like to draw some conclusions. A party that seeks to stifle, rather than foster or defend, this rich social creativity, would contribute to the creation or the support of a State that oppresses society. Such a State would end up serving only the plans of those in power, where responsibility is exercised solely in order to obtain consent for what has already been decided; even morality would be conceived of and affirmed in function of the *status quo*, which they also call “peace”.

Pasolini sadly said that a “Power State”, such as we find so often nowadays, is “inflexible”; at best, it leaves a little room for utopia, for this doesn’t last, or for individual melancholy, for this is impotent.¹³ True politics, on the contrary, is that which defends the possibility that something new can happen in life now, capable of modifying even the existing power arrangements.

Let me conclude by saying that politics has to decide whether to favor society exclusively as a tool in the hands of the State and its power, or to favor a State that is truly a secular State, that is, one at the service of social life according to the Thomistic concept of the “common good”, which was vigorously endorsed by the great, though forgotten, magisterium of Pope Leo XIII.¹⁴

I have made this last observation, obvious as it may seem, in order to recall that it is a journey that is anything but easy; it is as hard as any other journey to the truth in man’s life. But even here we must not fear what the Gospel says, “He who clings to his possessions, to his life, will lose them, and he who gives his life for the sake of Christ will gain it.”¹⁵

¹ cf. John Paul II *Human Life is Culture*. Address to UNESCO, June 2, 1980.

² Ibid.

³ cf. *Acts* 17:26-28.

⁴ cf. R. Guardini, *Power and Responsibility*, Sheed and Ward, NY, 1960, p. 3.

⁵ cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 14, 2. Vatican II. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, December 7, 1965.

⁶ cf. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 11.

⁷ cf. P.P. Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, Garzanti, Milano, 1993, 23, 41, 45ff., 50, 54.

⁸ cf. Vaclav Belohradsky (interview), "L'epoca degli ultimi uomini", in *L'Altra Europa*, 6 (1986), 5 ff.

⁹ Giussani uses here the Italian term "opere" meaning the whole gamut of social activity undertaken by individuals groups or associations to benefit society, usually known as non-profit initiatives rather than Government or for-profit works.

¹⁰ cf. John Paul II, *Christ is Man's Greatest "Resource"*, Rimini, 1982.

¹¹ "Veritas est adaequatio intellectus ad re" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Anima*, III 1, 1-2). cf. Also *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 16 art. 1&2. For a more complete treatment see L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, p. 3 ff.

¹² "Prudentia est recta ratio agibiliu", (St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* II-IIae, q. 47, art 8c.)

¹³ cf. P. P. Pasolini, *Scritti Corsari*, Garzanti, Milano, 1993, p. 64.

¹⁴ 13 cf. Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*.

¹⁵ cf. *Mt* 10:39, 16:25; *Lk* 9:24, 17:33; *Mk* 8:35.