



A New Vocabulary
to Communicate
the Culture of Life

By

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I first wish to thank the organizers of this seminar for the invitation they have extended to me as an Orthodox Christian Bishop. Then I should congratulate them for the choice of the topic. As time goes by, it is true that we are challenged by new questions which require our attention and need new ways to communicate our understanding enhancing a cohesive society and avoiding the creation of a chaotic Babel.

Let me first make two theoretic comments on the topic. The first is about the necessity of a renewed vocabulary that we need in order to communicate perennial values and the principles on which our society and our cultural background are based. Any community of faith and any faithful will always look first for whatever has proved in the past to be good, true and beautiful. We, human beings, need to maintain a link with our existential roots, definitely not as a way to preserve the past as such, but as a means of personal renewal using whatever element has proved to be valid, resistant and promising in building a healthy and balanced human person. This past needs contemporary means of expression to prove its validity in the present. We need new vocabulary that is like new wine. However, we cannot put new wine into old wineskins, because, if we do, the skins burst and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved (Math. 9, 17; Mc 2, 22; Lc 5, 37). In our context, this means that we cannot speak of external renovation (a new vocabulary, a new legal framework, a new effort to give a nuanced description of several cases in a multicultural society), without speaking, at the same time, about an internal and thus essential renewal of ourselves. From a religious point of view this renewal cannot be realized without divine intervention. In any case, if this message remains in religious framework, without collaboration with several sectors of the civil society, it is bound to die. The message is that internal renewal can be realized only if a person is baptized in all values and principles (including the principle of faith) that have resisted the nearly all-subduing time. We may notice here that modernist or post-modernist sociological theories undermining the role of the past in the present tend to obscure or neglect the important role of faith and sanctity in life. However, many members of the civil society (clergy included) need to collaborate in order to build platforms of proper education of the public and set an efficient network of information in the internet era.

The second point I would like to make in relation to our topic is about the culture of life. Certainly, we can approach this topic starting from different grounds (history, law, philosophy, sociology or political science). What I would like to underscore here is that the deeper sense and significance of the culture of life is related to the question of the dignity of the human person, that is how personhood becomes an

exclusive quality of the human being, different from any other human being and different from any animal. This means that the culture of life cannot be described e.g. in biological terms, but it has to be described in terms of a person who exists only because he/she is unique. It is the basically human question “who am I?” that we need to pose here. This question conditions and colors everyone’s attitudes and activities, thus creating each person’s own world, e.g. in expressing unconditional love or in offering forgiveness or in acts of moral choice, like sacrificing oneself for another. It happens more often than not that the “who am I?” question is confused with the “what am I?” question. I may say, I am open-minded or limited, clever or naive, believer or atheist, male or female, Rom or animist, Orthodox or Catholic etc. All these affirmations answer to the “what am I?” question. It is true that the “who” question can never be totally divorced from the “what” question in our created existence. This causes the difficulty in any attempt to create a true ontology of personhood. Nevertheless, the “who” question always has to be kept distinct from the “what” question, if the human being is to remain truly human.

Personhood is not about qualities or capacities of any kind: biological, intellectual, social or moral. Personhood is about the claim to uniqueness in the absolute sense of the term. The main concern is not if I am black or white, rich or poor, educated or a blockhead, but if I am a person in relation to other unique persons, thus forming the amazing variety that nature manifests. Personhood cannot be guaranteed by reference to function or ability in the society, to the specific role one plays, or to the psychological or intellectual experiences of the “self”. Such an approach has led in the past to an atrocious justification of sending e.g. disabled people to the gas chamber. The qualities mentioned above are not to be understood under the question how useful they are for the society, how much needed or not needed they are, but rather under the question how important they are for making the ingredient “me” a claim to absolute uniqueness, uniqueness that cannot be understood in terms of ideological extravagancies or individualistic choices, but in terms of a culture that respects the mystery of variety in the phenomenon of life and appreciates every single existence being in relation with any other manifestation of existence. The answer to the “who am I? question is particularly important to the extent that it regulates the relation between the culture of life and the dignity of the human person. If we consider happiness or pleasure or utility or immediate relief as of ultimate importance, then we could end up in a utilitarian understanding of the culture of life in the sense that Jeremy Bentham gave to the term utilitarianism as “the greatest happiness or greatest felicity principle”.

Dissociating oneself from a utilitarian approach of life acquires tremendous existential significance when placed in the context of ordinary human life. In relationships of genuine love (like love of the parents for their child) one does not identify the other with the help of his/her qualities (intellectual, social, moral, belief etc) or his/her usefulness, thus rejecting or accepting the other on that basis as a partner in a relationship. No matter how high personal qualities may be, personal identity will be lost if isolated from its ontological condition which is being in a relationship. This is why people aspiring to high ideals without keeping in mind that it is more important for them to maintain a respectful relationship with the other, are lost in a labyrinth of ideas they may work with, they may live for, and still remain awkwardly alone, far from the touch of personhood which lets love develop freely justifying the uniqueness of the human being. This is what Christian teachers sought to define as a person that needs to be ecstatic, that is going beyond oneself in order to meet the other out of love and not out of self-interest.

Having set these main lines about a renewed understanding of the culture of life, I choose the question “in what specific moment does a human person appear?” among so many other questions that one may pose in relation to abortion. Is it the moment of the conception, or is it three, six, nine months later, or when? To answer this question the Orthodox Christian tradition does not usually refer to documents, unless it is a question of canon law. The answer is normally based on the liturgical experience. This is so, because the Orthodox consider the liturgy a voluntary act of the faithful who wishes to give his/her life a rhythm, thus trying to avoid the confusion or loss in the meander of paradoxes and thoughts that human reality can produce. Sociologists like Durkheim (1858-1917) may have labeled this rhythm a naive rejection of the autonomy of human life restricting it in the limits set by a divine plan. What I have to point out here is that an authentic liturgical experience cannot be a hysterical devotion or an imposed or forced action; it acquires its true sense only as a means to put life and thoughts in order. In this sense the answer to the question I have put is given by the Bible when it says that the beginning of a person is his/her conception, because the history of salvation of humankind is the annunciation (Lc 1, 26- 38), when “the new child” was conceived, and especially when the name Jesus was given to the child (31). We know that a name is identified with existence, and consequently with personhood, especially in ancient Greek thought.

The incident of the annunciation does not only answer the question of “in what moment the person finds his/her origin”, but also how it comes to existence. The answer the Bible gives is that it comes to existence through a blessing and by divine intervention. We may

endlessly discuss moral issues concerning defective offsprings after this affirmation that divine intervention occurs in the origins of a human person. This discussion will bring to the fore questions like what is a person (defective or not) and what is a differently abled offspring for? In any case, I think that these questions will never overshadow the affirmation that an authentic culture of life is about a human person who is unique and with whom a relationship of love can exist and be a witness of how good, true and beautiful the human person can be. I can remember of no other moment so moving as my personal experience of those parents who lived with and for their differently abled children during long years that forged in their persons a humanity that I have not found elsewhere.