

1-1-2004

A Response to Martin R. Tripole, S.J.'s "John Paul II the Countercultural Pope"

William Kurz

Marquette University, william.kurz@marquette.edu

Published version. "A Response to Martin R. Tripole, S.J.'s "John Paul II the Countercultural Pope"," in *Creed and Culture: Jesuit Studies of Pope John Paul II*. Eds. Joseph W. Koterski and John J. Conley. Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2004: 57-60. [Publisher Link](#). © 2004 Saint Joseph's University Press. Used with permission.

A Response to Martin R. Tripole, S.J.

William S. Kurz, S.J.

I appreciated and enjoyed Martin Tripole's treatment of Pope John Paul II as a truly countercultural pope and thinker and writer. In my judgment, he made his case on the basis of John Paul II's personal history since his youth, of his constant confrontations against the many current anti-Gospel ideologies, and of three key aspects of his thought and writings: (a) John Paul II's philosophical defense of objective truth and a moral order; (b) the divinizing universalism resulting from Christ's Incarnation; and (c) completing the suffering of Christ through loving our neighbor.

I appreciated his especially helpful overview of John Paul II's philosophy and theology. I had been somewhat aware how John Paul II's encyclicals and apostolic exhortations have flowed from his more basic philosophical thought, but it was helpful to have it laid out so clearly.

Regarding John Paul II's divinizing universalism and optimism about the coming of the new millennium, I confess that I do not understand and appreciate as well this aspect of his thought and writings. I understand how the Incarnation makes a purely secular view of the human being impossible. But it is not clear to me, especially as a Scripture scholar, on what John Paul is basing his profound aspirations and hopes for the years after 2000. He does not seem to be envisaging the biblical apocalyptic second coming as such. On what is his fascination with the year 2000 based?

Martin's emphasis on John Paul II's affirmation of the importance and value of suffering as a main counterthrust to the "culture of death" is very helpful. This defense of the value of suffering is perhaps one of John Paul II's strongest countercultural stances. Martin ends on a wistful note. Though these three aspects of John Paul II's thought could have a major impact on the life of the Church and world, he asks, "Is anyone listening?" Martin rightly observes that the pope has been

unable to unite those Catholics willing to adjust their thinking to the ways of the world and those countercultural Catholics like himself who are not.

Personally, I am finally beginning to have some hope on the human level about the countercultural future of the Church, especially in America. Since 1994 I have been teaching as our Marquette introduction to theology the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. I have been surprised how positively the Marquette freshmen and sophomores have received this catechism. They truly find it a refreshing new and clear presentation of what Catholicism has taught for some 2000 years. Even Protestants and a Buddhist student went out of their way to say how much they liked the catechism.

However, the honeymoon ended when we reached the sixth commandment, when the students looked on me as if I was from some other planet. No matter what I said to explain the church's teaching on sex, the students were too brainwashed since their grade school sex education to even comprehend what I was saying.

Finally, I gave them an outline of a talk by Marquette University journalism teacher Dr. William Thorn on "Boomers and Generation X," which cleverly contrasted what it was like for the students' Boomer parents growing up, and what it was like for their Generation X growing up. They responded enthusiastically to the handout, and were clearly touched by the contrast between their parents growing up in relatively stable two-parent families, with no day care or latch key kids, virtually no teenage suicide, much less sexual abuse, violence, etc. I pointed out that one of the most telling differences between the raising of the two generations was the sexual revolution.

I challenged them, "If you like the suffering you've gone through, so much of which is caused by family breakdown and the sexual revolution, then 'Hooray for the Sexual Revolution.' But if you don't like what has happened to you and/or your age group, then maybe the Church has something worth learning to teach you about the meaning of sex and marriage and family." Finally, they showed more willingness to listen to the catechism's teachings on sex. And many of them tried to adjust their own ways of living as a consequence.

One other hopeful sign for me of a countercultural phase for the Church in America are the new kinds and numbers of vocations that we are getting to the priesthood and religious life. I refer especially to the Feb. 28, 1998, *America* article, "A View of Religious Vocations," by Albert DiIanni, and the April letter by Richard Hermes, S.J., in response to it. The main point of the article was: those religious orders that are recovering their classic purposes and spiritualities are starting to get

many strong vocations. Those that continue in their progressive ways so that they are not very distinguishable from the culture around them are dying out for lack of vocations. This confirms my personal experience as a university teacher: I know personally some eight to a dozen young seminarians and priests from Marquette or Milwaukee who are studying or functioning as priests, but all for other dioceses or orders because they did not want to be subjected to a "progressive" seminary. There was an initial flood of angry hate mail against this article, but then came an April response to these negative letters from then seminarian Richard Hermes, S.J., "From the 'Younger' Generation." He observed that it is true that most seminarians and young religious of the past fifteen years are more "conservative" than the previous generation, and he noted four manifestations of the "new" conservatism:

1. *Prayer.* It is true that many new seminarians do value the rosary and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament (a point of criticism in the negative mail), but do not these have sanctifying effects?

2. *Liturgy.* Many seminarians dispute the informality and frequent abuses of liturgy to which they are subjected (improper liturgical garments, unauthorized changes, etc.). They want to retrieve the authentic aims of the liturgical movement, along with a healthy fidelity to authoritative liturgical directives of the last forty years.

3. *Garb.* The new seminarians' increased willingness to wear clerical garb or religious habit is not only from obedience to universal church law and the clear will of the pope, but from their personal desire to give tangible witness "to who we are" and to refuse to further the disappearance of our states of life by our individual disappearance into the anonymity of secular society.

4. *Theology.* Consider the controversial teachings which are much more likely to be embraced by a 30-year-old priest than a 60-year-old: that women are not called to orders, that marriage is permanent, that intentional sterilization of the marriage act is not God's will, that celibacy is an indispensable element of Catholic understanding of priesthood, that homosexual activity is not part of a virtuous life, and that it is a grave moral offense to destroy a human being in its mother's womb. Belief in these teachings is hardly reducible to the tired charges of "fundamentalism" and "traditionalism." At the very least they are the common faith and practice of the Church across many centuries; even now they continue to have wide theological support, and they have been reiterated against the academic established guild of dissent by Church authorities who have God's mandate to interpret Christ's will and to bind consciences.

The seminarian notes that even if there have been excesses in this desire of

young seminarians and religious to recover lost riches of Catholic faith, many of these efforts were undertaken in good faith, with little local guidance and sometimes in the face of hostile opposition from those training the seminarians and religious.

In an April 1998 conference to the priests (and Archbishop Chaput) of Denver, I passed out three handouts to describe human aspirations that we face as we enter the third millennium: "The Wounded Generation," by Vicky Thorn, founder of Project Rachel for women who have had abortions; "Boomers and Generation X," by William Thorn, her husband, chair of Journalism at Marquette University; and the *America* article: "A View of Religious Vocations" by Albert Dilanni, former superior general and current vocation director of the Boston Province of the Marists. After two generations who did not receive solid catechesis, there is a growing hunger in the young (and the dissatisfied of all ages) for solid and clear Catholic teachings, for straightforward direction in how to live one's life, for unambiguous distinctions between right and wrong behaviors, for an end to the relativistic confusion rampant in so many parishes. At Marquette University we've gathered some 100-350 students from groups like Marquette Students for Life, Knights of Columbus, Catholic Outreach, and the Cardinal Bellarmine Society who want Marquette to become more classically Catholic. They are forming a new group, a kind of unofficial chapter of the Newman Society, dedicated to fostering the implementation of *Ex corde ecclesiae* on Marquette's campus.

Therefore, in response to Martin's question, "Is anyone listening?" I find reasons for hope that the future generations will be more open than the Boomers were to the counter-cultural message of Pope John Paul II. I do believe that the future lies with these new desires and hopes for restored and renewed Catholicism, and not with the tired mantras of political correctness from the dissenting and greying Boomers.