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The Church, Science and Modern Humanism

Rev. Charles H. Hagan

The author's thesis at the Gregorian University in Rome, from which he received his doctorate, dealt with the Church's response to secular humanism. Father Hagan is chaplain for the Catholic Physicians' Guild of Philadelphia.

The Second Vatican Council was one of the great happenings in the Roman Catholic Church in the 20th century. The Council's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" emphasized three important truths about the human person:

- 1) The human person is the pinnacle of creation.
- 2) The human person is of real value by reason of being made in the divine image.
- 3) The greatest human achievement by far is the effort to humanize the world and social relationships (GS 33, 34, 35).

Thus the Church affirmed the ultimate reason why the human person is of value; namely, because he or she bears the divine image. For this reason then, the human person cannot be the object of manipulation or experimentation.

In analyzing modern society, the Second Vatican Council's official teaching went on to point out the present inclination to exalt the scientific method with its emphasis on observable data and its corresponding inclination to be skeptical of traditional wisdom (GS 37). Such an attitude can and often does foster a mentality of self-sufficiency and an indifference to ultimate questions about human life.

Scientific progress has contributed greatly to the advance of the human species and to the development of solidarity among men and women throughout the world. The Second Vatican Council also recog-

nized that scientific progress and the possibilities which it creates can provide some preparation for acceptance of the gospel message (S 57). Scientific progress is ambiguous, however it is controlled and applied by reasonable men and women who are capable of good and evil. We need only recall that Germany between 1920 and 1940 produced some of the greatest scientific minds of this century whose achievements were used for the destruction of human beings in unprecedented numbers. The Second Humanist Manifesto of 1973 recognized the destructive possibilities in scientific advances:

In learning to apply the scientific method to nature and human life, we have opened the door to ecological damage, overpopulation, dehumanizing institutions, totalitarian repression, and nuclear and biochemical disaster.¹

A narrow humanism with its belief in unlimited progress has become increasingly difficult to substantiate. Humanism without a deeper understanding provided by traditional wisdom fails to provide an adequate explanation for evil in the human person as well as a corresponding appreciation for the good — even the heroic — of which the human person is capable. In short, it cannot motivate people to change substantially because it does not provide adequate conceptual tools for self-understanding. For this reason perhaps, no society in human history has been based exclusively on humanistic concepts.²

Pope John Paul II, in his first encyclical letter, recognized clearly the barrenness of a modern world permeated by atheistic marxism and secular humanism — a world in which justice and social love are often forgotten. In his analysis of modern society, Pope John Paul singles out as a root cause of present widespread human misery the failure to harness technological advances by ethical principles in the interest of the development of the whole of mankind.

Man's situation today is certainly not uniform but marked with numerous differences. These differences have causes in history, but they also have strong ethical effects. Indeed everyone is familiar with the picture of the consumer civilization, which consists in a certain surplus of goods necessary for man and for entire societies — and we are dealing precisely with the rich, highly developed societies — while the remaining societies — at least the broad sectors of them — are suffering from hunger, with many people dying each day of starvation and malnutrition. Hand in hand go a certain abuse of freedom by a group — an abuse linked precisely with a consumer attitude uncontrolled by ethics — and a limitation by it of the freedom of others, that is to say those suffering marked shortages and being driven to conditions of even worse misery and destitution.³

As Pope John Paul II has observed, the man of today seems always to be under threat from what he produces. Why has this power to subdue the earth and bring it under control now become so problematic? The answer so often is that man needs a long range vision — a vision in which the human person sees himself as a custodian or guardian of natural resources and the fruit of human toil which are meant

to be shared by everyone on our planet. In our American society, the media most often focus upon men and women who possess much and yet seem to show little concern for sharing what they acquired with others. How often we see on a television interview the sports star or entertainer who has a half-dozen or more luxury cars or who has recently moved to a home far exceeding his or her needs.

Our Western society with its emphasis upon individual achievement can be helped to appreciate the need for solidarity through a real appreciation of the dignity and worth of the human person. Such an appreciation can be best achieved through understanding the objective demands of the moral order so well summed up in the letter "Redemptor Hominis":

The essential meaning of . . . dominion of man over the visible world, which the Creator Himself gave man for his task, consists in the priority of ethics over technology, in the primacy of the person over things, and in the superiority of spirit over matter.⁴

If the human person is perceived as having the same origin, destiny, and responsibility for creation as others, then there is less need to envy or imitate the person who has much wealth but refuses to share with others. The truly heroic man or woman is that person who risks most in order to share his or her person and wealth as fully as possible with others. Such a theological perspective is capable of liberating modern humanism from a vision which is too narrow to effectively challenge the human person to growth in understanding and appreciation of the solidarity of the human community and the need to protect our natural environment and use it wisely.

REFERENCES

1. Humanist Manifesto II, p. 5.
2. Cf. Charles Hartshorn, *Beyond Humanism: Essays in the Philosophy of Nature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1937), p. 95.
3. John Paul II, Pope, "Redemptor Hominis," *Origins*.
4. *Ibid.*