

THE ECLIPSE OF THE SENSE OF GOD AND OF MAN

FROM THE GOSPEL OF LIFE (EVANGELIUM VITAE), 21–23

IN SEEKING THE DEEPEST ROOTS OF THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN the “culture of life” and the “culture of death”...[we] go to the heart of the tragedy being experienced by modern man: the eclipse of the sense of God and of man, typical of a social and cultural climate dominated by secularism, which, with its ubiquitous tentacles, succeeds at times in putting Christian communities themselves to the test.

Those who allow themselves to be influenced by this climate easily fall into a sad vicious circle: when the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man, of his dignity and his life; in turn, the systematic violation of the moral law, especially in the serious matter of respect for human life and its dignity, produces a kind of progressive darkening of the capacity to discern God’s living and saving presence...

Consequently, when the sense of God is lost, the sense of man is also threatened and poisoned, as the Second Vatican Council concisely states: “Without the Creator the creature would disappear...But when God is forgotten the creature itself grows unintelligible (*Gaudium et Spes*, 36).” Man...no longer considers life as a splendid gift of God, something “sacred” entrusted to his responsibility and thus also to his loving care and “veneration.” Life itself becomes a mere “thing,” which man claims as his exclusive property, completely subject to his control and manipulation...Birth and death, instead of being primary experiences demanding to be “lived,” become things to be merely “possessed” or “rejected.”

Moreover, once all reference to God has been removed, it is not surprising that the meaning of everything else becomes profoundly distorted...By living “as if God did not exist,” man not only loses sight of the mystery of God, but also of the mystery of the world and the mystery of his own being.

The eclipse of the sense of God and of man inevitably leads to a practical materialism, which breeds individualism, utilitarianism and hedonism...The values of being are replaced by those of having. The only goal which counts is the pursuit of one’s own material well-being. The so-called “quality of life” is interpreted primarily or exclusively as

economic efficiency, inordinate consumerism, physical beauty and pleasure, to the neglect of the more profound dimensions—interpersonal, spiritual and religious—of existence.

In such a context suffering, an inescapable burden of human existence but also a factor of possible personal growth, is “censored,” rejected as useless, indeed opposed as an evil, always and in every way to be avoided. When it cannot be avoided and the prospect of even some future well-being vanishes, then life appears to have lost all meaning and the temptation grows in man to claim the right to suppress it.

Within this same cultural climate, the body is no longer perceived as a properly personal reality, a sign and place of relations with others, with God and with the world...Consequently, sexuality too is depersonalized and exploited: from being the sign, place and language of love, that is, of the gift of self and acceptance of another, in all the other’s richness as a person, it increasingly becomes the occasion and instrument for self-assertion and the selfish satisfaction of personal desires and instincts. Thus the original import of human sexuality is distorted and falsified, and the two meanings, unitive and procreative, inherent in the very nature of the conjugal act, are artificially separated: in this way the marriage union is betrayed and its fruitfulness is subjected to the caprice of the couple. Procreation then becomes the “enemy” to be avoided in sexual activity: if it is welcomed, this is only because it expresses a desire, or indeed the intention, to have a child “at all costs,” and not because it signifies the complete acceptance of the other and therefore an openness to the richness of life which the child represents.

In the materialistic perspective described so far, interpersonal relations are seriously impoverished. The first to be harmed are women, children, the sick or suffering, and the elderly. The criterion of personal dignity—which demands respect, generosity and service—is replaced by the criterion of efficiency, functionality and usefulness: others are considered not for what they “are,” but for what they “have, do and produce.” This is the supremacy of the strong over the weak. ■



Pope St. John Paul II on his Encyclical *The Gospel of Life* (1995): “...[it] is meant to be a precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability, and at the same time, a pressing appeal addressed to each and every person in the name of God: respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life! Only in this direction will you find justice, development, true freedom, peace and happiness!”