

Unveiling Reason: A Foundation for the Church's Pastoral Response Today¹

On the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, Pope John Paul II took the opportunity to highlight the significance of the seismic political and economic shifts reverberating in the world as the Iron Curtain was lifted. More crucially, in *Centesimus Annus* (*CA*) he reminds how a just political order, in particular as taught by the Church through its “social magisterium,” springs from the Church’s “correct view of the human person” (*CA*, no.11) and therefore, from its “correct picture of society” (*CA*, no.13). True human and cultural development must rest on a robust foundation:

The apex of development is the exercise of the right and duty to seek God, to know him and to live in accordance with that knowledge. ... Total recognition must be given to the rights of the human conscience, which is bound only to the truth, both natural and revealed. The recognition of these rights represents the primary foundation of every authentically free political order (*CA* no. 29).

Yet, merely two years later, John Paul II argued plainly how freedom from communist and atheistic coercion in particular - the worst threats to human flourishing according to the tradition of Catholic social doctrine in the twentieth century – was not sufficient. As presented in *Veritatis Splendor* (*VS*), the moral “crisis” of the times rested upon an erroneous understanding and exercise of freedom:

* Nadia Delicata is a lecturer in fundamental moral theology at the Faculty of Theology, University of Malta, with research interests in the theology of christian life in a digital age.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was drafted for the “Seminar on Challenges Confronting the Church and Her Pastoral Response,” Faculty of Theology, Mdina, July 4, 2013. I am grateful for the many comments received from colleagues at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Malta that have enriched this paper.

Man's capacity to know the truth is ... darkened, and his will to submit to it is weakened. Thus, giving himself over to relativism and scepticism (cf. Jn 18:38), he goes off in search of an illusory freedom apart from truth itself (*VS*, no.1).

Blindness to truth and therefore, aimless or "indifferent" freedom² has become a central magisterial theme, as relativism steadily gained ascendancy in western culture. Five years after *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II dedicated another encyclical solely to the question of truth, this time focused on the relation between its attestation in faith and through reason. In *Fides et Ratio* (*FR*), he described the eclipse of truth thus:

With a false modesty, people rest content with partial and provisional truths, no longer seeking to ask radical questions about the meaning and ultimate foundation of human, personal and social existence. In short, the hope that philosophy might be able to provide definitive answers to these questions has dwindled (*FR* no.5).

Philosophy's recent disenchantment implies pessimism and nihilism, but more profoundly a loss of "hope," a spiritual death that accompanies the eclipse of the Transcendent, the "death of God." The modern "flattening" of the horizon of meaning becomes the flattening of human beings as "meaning-makers." Nietzsche's pronouncement is revealed as Minerva's owl flying at the dusk of modernity.

The effects of our predicament are perceptible everywhere to the extent of becoming clichés: loss of values, self-centredness, a turn away from religion and, in John Paul II's own evocative phrase, a "culture of death." The essence of the impasse, however, goes beyond "naïve" assumptions about culture and requires the sieve of critical reflection to arrive at conviction as a "second naïveté."³ Only with an adequate hermeneutical framework that leads to conviction can there be confidence that the "reading" of the imaginaries and malaises of culture offers a robust foundation for the Church's pastoral strategies in Malta and beyond. Short of that clarity, our pastoral efforts remain as adrift as the culture itself caught in blind relativism.

Starting with the "signs of the times" that burden the corpus of recent magisterial teachings, the cluster of concerns suggests the following trajectory for reflection. The moral question of the relation between freedom and truth, or

² "Freedom of indifference" is the phrase used by Servais Pinckaers for a non-teleological understanding of freedom, or freedom reduced to mere choice unbound by moral realism. See Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 327-353.

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas University Press, 1976).

whether truth about being is the “law” ordering human freedom, rests upon the more foundational relation between truth and reason, or the access to truth of human reason. Reason, and more specifically the *limits* of human reason, is thus key to the predicament, because reason, the essence of what makes us human, is the medium, the “resonant interval”⁴ between the human as (potential) knower and the (potentially) known.⁵ What the human attests to be “true” (or intelligible and verifiable) depends on its self-understanding as knower and its understanding of “otherness” as knowable. Hence, reason necessarily mediates between subjectivity and objectivity, and in mediating, transforms the knower and the known. Correspondingly, as the understanding and praxis of reason changes, so do anthropology and the communal *ethos*. In other words, human reason is made palpable in concrete lifestyles; is manifested in communal imaginaries; is revealed in “culture” - the quintessential expression of human freedom in community.⁶

⁴ Marshall McLuhan and Bruce Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13. The metaphors of “medium” and “resonant interval” can help illustrate not only an analogical understanding of human reason, but the moral realism that it implies. Interestingly, McLuhan will claim that the perfect illustration of his famous dictum, “the medium is the message” is the *Logos* made flesh. Likewise, human reason has a limited, but nonetheless real, ability to grasp and reflect upon in prudential action, the eternal *Logos* that orders creation.

⁵ As contemporary Thomists, like Jean Porter, Russell Hittinger, and the Dominicans Pinckaers and Romanus Cessario have argued, the Scholastics and Aquinas in particular, understood “natural law” as a participation in the eternal law according to our human nature as reason. (See in particular, Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); Russell Hittinger, *The First Grace: Rediscovering the Natural Law in a Post-Christian World*, 2nd ed. (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007); and Romanus Cessario, *Introduction to Moral Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

From this traditional Christian perspective, that finds its root in the classical Aristotelian and Ciceronian traditions, “natural law” is properly *recta ratio* that, in being grounded in the first principles of practical reason, orders human action prudentially. It follows, then, that the crux of the moral and cultural issues we face in postmodernity is the understanding of human reason - more specifically, the challenge of retrieving a robust understanding of reason from its anaemic version inherited from modernity. Alisdair MacIntyre’s evocative argument, explored in his classic *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Bloomsbury, 2007), in particular 51-61, is spot on: that the Enlightenment is our “darkest age” since “moral philosophy” properly construed (that is, the deontology and utilitarianism emerging out of the modern context devoid of “enchantment”) is mere fragments of an ancient narrative that, disconnected from the whole, have no reasonable or intelligible foundation. Hence why it is deeply ironic that what replaces *phronesis* in the Age of Reason is emotivism justified through rationalization.

⁶ If a rich manifestation of human nature as reason is the full life of the virtuous person, as

Accordingly, in this paper, I will concentrate on “reason” in an attempt to understand the moral, spiritual, properly “human” crisis of the times. The questions I will pose will proceed as follows:

What is reason?

Is the human truly “reasonable”?

How do we unveil reason after its eclipse?

In conclusion, as the problem of “reason” is revealed as inherently emerging from and constructing “culture” - in the classical Hellenistic sense of *paideia* - I will offer general pastoral orientations as the Church confronts and learns from the challenges posed by contemporary “digital culture.”

What is Reason?

Philosophy’s disenchantment with ontology and turn to the subject imply a narrowing of the understanding of reason, from one directed by its final cause to one dominated by material-efficient causality. If reason in classical philosophy was oriented to knowing “Being,” and thus characterized by the search for what is true, good and beautiful, based on the premise of participation in, or isomorphism with, divine Wisdom or Reason, from Late Scholasticism onwards reason was increasingly reduced to its cognitive operations, in particular ratiocination, as the process of thinking “logically.” Unsurprisingly, just as in this process there is a rise in instrumental reason, or reason as *tekhne* and therefore, as “method” to all knowledge, so there is the eclipse of the essence of reason, as the medium itself between knower and known.⁷ This medium, the very act of intelligibility as “receptivity,” the transcending leap of grasping and attesting to essences or universals, reveals how reality-out-there beckons, floods our consciousness with awe and urges our response.

Consciousness of *bios* as pregnant with meaning that transcends it, awakens the primordial response of worship as the attestation to a radical Transcendence that is beyond our grasp and therefore “unknowable.” Yet awareness of the other - in particular of the radical Other - implies and births consciousness of self. “Naming” is the “spontaneous” creative (*poiesis*) response⁸ that in acknowledging

understood by the Greeks, “culture” or *paideia* revealed (and at the same time, strove to fulfill) a people’s collective ideals in the *polis*. “Culture” is thus to the community what the virtues are to the individual: the ideals of a communal good life, and the manifestation of excellences that human nature as social is capable of.

⁷ Walter J. Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Harvard University Press, 1958; repr., University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁸ “Receptivity” and “spontaneity” are the two distinct aspects of human rationality that John McDowell explores in depth in his *Mind and World*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

the self and other dawns awareness that reality itself is intelligible because “symbolic” of Being, capturing absence-in-presence and presence-in-absence.⁹ Reason as “symbolic” is reason as intelligibility,¹⁰ as it is nurtured on the dialectic that “what is” is known through “what is not.” Naming, or externalizing the awareness of “what is” in utterance, and therefore in “what is not,” reveals the aporia of reason-as-symbol that in being transcending bares most glaringly human limitation. Hence, the awareness of the symbolic nature of all things, of their revealedness and hiddenness, of their inextinguishable meaning(s), implies and necessitates a human *community* that shares and exchanges meaning.¹¹

It is not surprising, therefore, that for the Greeks, the ultimate symbol of all that is known, was the same “name” that captured “utterance,” the verbal act of naming, and intelligibility. *Logos* is the true medium and message, the known as knowledge, because it is, in itself, an act of interpretation, judgment, and conviction and thus an assent to reality as received. As “intelligibility” and “word,” *ratio* and *oratio*, it is the acknowledgement that all reality is fundamentally meaningful, communicative, “Word.”

Likewise, it is not surprising that the Greeks were the first “humanists” marveling at how the human who grasps symbol is simultaneously the human

University Press, 1996).

⁹ Examples of this belief are evident in the Greek and Hebrew traditions. In the *Cratylus*, Socrates rebukes Hermogenes: “I should say that this giving of names can be no such light matter as you fancy, or the work of light or chance persons; and Cratylus is right in saying that things have names by nature, and that not every man is an artificer of names, but he only who looks to the name which each thing by nature has, and is, will be able to express the ideal forms of things in letters and syllables,” “Cratylus,” trans. by Benjamin Jowett, in *The Dialogues of Plato, Translated into English with Analyses and Introduction*, 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895); available online at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/cratylus.html>. Genesis 2:19 says: “So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.”

¹⁰ Jean Porter makes the same point when she affirms the scholastic and classical insight that, “in other words, our most basic processes of perception and reasoning attain reality because the natural operations of the mind are isomorphic with the fundamental metaphysical structures of reality,” Jean Porter, *Ministers of the Law: A Natural Law Theory of Legal Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 103n42.

¹¹ Jean Porter makes the point that when Aquinas links the natural human inclination to seek the truth about God or transcendence with the inclination to live in community (*STh* I-II 94.2) he is implying both that the search for truth always presupposes a tradition of communal inquiry, but also that it “places an obligation on each society to sustain such traditions of inquiry,” including to provide the means, like leisure time and places of encounter, to pursue such speculative activity, Porter, *Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 91.

who creates symbol - primary of which is speech itself that mediates between subject and object, interiority and exteriority. Reasoning well, reflected in speaking well, distinguished the “cultured” from the “barbarian,” since speech as archetype of all creative acts - of the human as knower, actor and creator - was the essence of *paideia*.¹² Hence, reasoning well as speaking well was as much a path to knowledge as it was a strategy to recreate the human and, through forming men and women, to shape culture.

In the west, the trajectory of civilization is precisely to become ever more dominated by technologies of the “word” in service of education as enculturation: from poetry-*mousike* to alphabetic literacy, from chirography to typography.¹³ The malleability of word to translate and enrich reality from one medium to another is reflected in the way it takes on “flesh” through multiple technologies to recreate culture: through “song” and “memorable speech” passed on across generations of Homeric bards, but also through alphabetic literacy mediated through papyrus, codex and paper that inspires the precision of plastic arts and the order of human government. The message of every shift in culture was none other than the “character” of the human - always seeking to reflect truly “human” essence - through being a creature and creator of culture.

Therefore, who the human would become was - and, necessarily remains, in particular in periods of cultural transition - the point of contention. Between interpreting/reconfiguring reality and forming/recreating the human, *logos* also necessarily dissected and distinguished, judged and evaluated. Two students of Socrates, Isocrates and Plato, who lived at the period of transition between Greek orality and literacy, became the forefathers of the age-old battle between Ancients and Moderns, between “reason” as “analogical” and reason as “logical,” between the human as symbol-maker/interpreter and the human as logical thinker.¹⁴ Contra the descendants of Plato and his “philosophical” (dialectical) educational project grounded in mathematics,¹⁵ the Ancients followed in

¹² Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, trans. Gilbert Highet, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1943-45), 1: xvii.

¹³ Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963) and Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

¹⁴ For a detailed history of the intellectual battle between Ancients and Moderns, or between grammatical-analogical reason and dialectical-logical reason, see Marshall McLuhan, *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko, 2006).

¹⁵ The Moderns, on the other hand, would paradoxically gain ascendancy after the crisis of Nominalism. The ensuing crisis of reason reveals most categorically that the three arts of the trivium must always work in tandem, with grammar and rhetoric serving the communicative-

Isocrates' more political footsteps emphasizing the necessity of *egkuklios paideia* to form the Ciceronian ideal of the *doctus orator*.¹⁶ Grounded in the interpretation of letters (grammar), but also in the sifting of arguments (dialectic), education crowned persuasive speech (rhetoric) in service of the *polis* as queen of the arts and sciences. Even Aristotle, student of Plato and dialectician par excellence claimed that the ultimate sign of genius was the ability to symbolize reproduced in discourse:

The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor [literally: to be metaphorical, *to metaphorikon einai*]. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius [*euphuias*], since a good metaphor [literally: to metaphorize well, *eu metaphorein*] implies an intuitive perception of the similarity [*to to homoion theorein*] in dissimilars," (*Poetics* 1459a.3-8; see also *Rhetoric* 1412a.10).¹⁷

“Metaphor” is the figure of speech that communicates analogy and, hence, the building block of the *lexeis* of poetry and rhetoric, which for the Ancients, were the privileged expressions of reason. Poetry imitates “life” by reconstructing it through narrative and, in particular, tragic *muthos* that purges emotion. Rhetoric persuades and therefore transforms the human who “acts” and who, through acting, shapes culture. In both domains metaphor articulates (and therefore recreates over and over, since reality as symbolic is inextinguishable) “truth” as received and as communicated; a truth whose essence both “is” and “is like” - and thus, paradoxically, “is not.” For the truth of poetry is fiction, just as the truth of rhetoric is *doxa*, “probable” opinion. Both are essential for moulding an *ethos*, the character of the *phronimos*, who as the master of practical wisdom, the virtuous human, is true philosopher. Just as the human not only interprets symbol, but symbolizes, so the human not only seeks truth, but actualizes it in action. Hence, the Ancients declared that the ordering of human freedom to truth, and how truly free action can only follow from the right exercise of reason (*recta ratio*), is the essence of being human. This human form is ultimately actualized in political life as the expression of human creative cooperation and participation in a shared social, properly cultural, life.¹⁸

rhetorical function that properly creates culture through communal deliberation.

¹⁶ Henri Irenée Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 89-90.

¹⁷ As quoted in Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1978), 23.

¹⁸ Porter, *Ministers of the Law*, 106.

Is the Human Truly “Reasonable”?

This moral realism is pivotal to the Christian tradition that inherits and transforms Hellenistic assumptions, in particular as passed on by the Stoics. Indeed, central to the Christian tradition is the sacredness of all reality as utterance that is taken to its logical extreme: God who reveals Godself as Wisdom is God who is Word.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people (Jn 1:1-4).

The Word of God *is* God - acknowledging, in fact, how the intelligible God is the Word who reveals the Silence of Absolute Transcendence. The Word-made-flesh is also the Second Adam as Wisdom/*Phronimos* actualized in the ultimate act of self-offering love that recreates the world. Christ is thus the messenger, the medium and the message: “Absolute bringer of salvation” in being revealer and final revelation. As the Council of Chalcedon eloquently puts it, he is “truly God and truly Man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood.” The Hypostatic Union prefigures human divinization, the transcendence of humanity through self-offering in the Holy Spirit who births New Creation.

The human is thus a microcosm reflecting the macrocosm, through its ability to read the “book of the world” - authored by the Divine Logos and to be actualized by the Divine *Ruah*, “Lord and giver of Life” - and thus participate as co-creator in this revealed Wisdom that orders human freedom.¹⁹ “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27).

¹⁹ These points are clarified by Sergius Bulgakov in his three-volume work *On Divine-Humanity*, in particular through his Sophiology. Bulgakov not only emphasizes how the creation of the world is an ongoing process of divine self-revelation as Sophia, the foundation of the world the self-revelation of the Father in the Son and the Holy Spirit externalized in a created “other”, but also how human comes to be as a separate act of creation precisely by being persons in the image and likeness of Divine Personhood. See the first volume on Christology, *Lamb of God*, trans. and ed. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); the second volume on Pneumatology that concludes with a post-script on Paterology, *The Comforter*, trans. and ed. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), and the third volume on creation, eschatology and the Church, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. and ed. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

But throughout its existence, fallible humankind is also faced by the original sin of *hubris*: just as it can embrace the opacity of reason and order its freedom accordingly to seek the Transcendent, so it can collapse the transcending impetus of reason, simply close in on itself and marvel at its own images and creations (including aspects of reason itself). If the Fall presents the human as desiring to be God, the myth of Narcissus is the quintessential narrative of man and woman who deify the self. The myth of Babel replicates the same dynamism but on the collective: humankind marvels at its own accomplishments and sees itself as *terminus*. Reason shrivels as it turns inward and adulates its accomplishments. Classical humanism deteriorates to aestheticism and egoistic contemplation unless it opens itself up in service to what is greater than itself - the Roman Empire; and for the Holy Roman Empire, God.²⁰ Just as tragically, the contemporary human is enthralled by its knowledge and technological accomplishments, “narcotized” by its “extensions” of self.²¹

Yet, the hubris of self-deification is in-built in the same mechanism that allows the human to be reasonable by being knower and imitator-creator rolled into one. Jean Baudrillard has noted the deterioration of symbol to simulacrum that accompanies the decadence of reason turned in on itself. He stresses two important turning points in the history of Christendom characterized by the use of “images” as symbols of the divine.²²

The first is the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy that casts the first doubts that icon can make itself reality, masking and emptying God. Doubt that symbol is sacramental and thus a true representation of the Real was already evident with Platonism and to an extreme, with Gnosticism. But the fear that human “images” could displace God indicates how human reason could deify itself.

Indeed, past the Triumph of Orthodoxy and the victory of images, in the west the very mode of speech and reason starts shifting. If until the first millennium reason sought to interpret reality and to reconfigure it, and thus classical education and theology were dominated by hermeneutics and oratory, the rise of Scholasticism represents the new dominance of dialectical thought that, in its decadence, will collapse the tension of the “is”-“is not” by believing that it discerned not mere probable opinion, but incontestable, univocal truth. The watershed is the thirteenth century work by “Peter of Spain” where, for pedagogical reasons, dialectic is reduced to formal logic, and thus, formal logic

²⁰ Marrou, *History of Education*, 226.

²¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, critical ed. (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko, 2003), 61-70.

²² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 4-6.

rather than the discernment of probable opinion, becomes “philosophy.” For generations, the *Summulae Logicales* becomes the standard textbook of arts scholasticism and the fodder of youthful minds. As reason increasingly distances knower and the known, subject and object, *logos* as symbol is weakened and reduced to “method”: an ordered, linear, systematic path of arriving to, and organizing knowledge.²³

The logical conclusion is the crisis of Nominalism, from which, as Servais Pinckaers forcefully argues, the Church (and the world) has still to recuperate.²⁴ As the Moderns doubt that *logos* captures the essence of things, language is reduced to conventional signs disconnected from the real or Being. Likewise, as the knower increasingly doubts that he or she can know truly, there increasingly is no Knowable, let alone Known. Thus, the “death of God” represents the *terminus* of Nominalism, just as the “baroqueness of images,” Baudrillard’s second turning point in the “long march” from symbol to simulacrum, is the reversal of iconoclasm.²⁵ If iconoclasm feared that images might take over reality, baroque aestheticism sought to recreate a reality that had now “disappeared.”

Unsurprisingly, the next phase, our phase, is of the proliferation of images that are purely self-referential. We no longer live in a universe of symbols, but in a self-created matrix of simulacra.²⁶ We no longer live in a universe that beckons because it is rich in meaning, but in our own constructed universes. From the numbness of modern atomization, where the “individual” barely acknowledged the need for shared meaning, “post-moderns” (or post-post-moderns?) throw themselves with total abandon to the tribalizing effects of new technologies that promise a self-made “communion of saints” - all the time forgetting that as we are oned through imitating the desire of an other, we become rivalristically, not “personally” inter-twin(n)ed.²⁷

So quo vadis homo sapiens? As humankind doubted the power of speech, it compensated with the power of tools. The human’s desire for transcendence and search for the real has been uttered in these recent centuries through the power to make things. The human as toolmaker is the same human who speaks, and humanity’s tools can be interpreted in the same way millennia of literacy perfected

²³ Ong, *Decay of Dialogue*, 59-91.

²⁴ Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, 463-464.

²⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 4-5.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 6.

²⁷ This is the fundamental thesis of Rene Girard’s mimetic theory. For its application to postmodern or digital culture characterized by simulacra, see Nadia Delicata, “Towards a Theology of Friendship in the Global Village,” in *René Girard and Creative Mimesis*, ed. Vern Neufeld Redekop and Thomas Ryba (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 97-116.

the art of seeking knowledge through *grammatica*. Thus, from the human who is reasonable through seeking to know being analogically (Aristotle's four causes), to the human who is reasonable by seeking to interpret texts metaphorically - in particular the divine word (the four senses of scripture) - to the human who can interpret the meaning of human-made tools and artefacts (the McLuhans' four "laws of media" as "grammars" and therefore "literacies" of media).²⁸ And the message that emerges through discerning the form of contemporary artefacts is that humankind seeks to be spirit or immortal, desires to be one or whole, and see *itself* as the engineer of all reality, through the manipulation of code, the new pattern of intelligibility or *logos*.²⁹ Through our tools we express the longing for transcendence, unity and creativity- "life." But we are unable to discern that what is real is the desire itself pointing to a Transcendent beyond anything we could ever actualize or know transparently through our limited means. We mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself. We take our reason for Logos and we make ourselves gods.

Technological, post-literate culture is a giant playground of radical experimentation unbound to natural order because we are inheritors of a modern tradition that eclipsed reason-as-symbol, but retrieved the toolmaker. Like unruly children, we randomly redefine the rules of the game and reinvent who we are as players. We no longer speak of "humanism" for we claim to have become "post-human."³⁰ But, unlike modern humanists who marveled at their thinking, the post-human marvels at its virtual realities as much as the Ancients marveled at Being. Just like grammarians, it seeks to make sense of its experiences, to recognize patterns and to discern cohesive wholes. Unlike the Ancients, however, its universe(s) remains flattened, its "Word" scattered into many "words."³¹

²⁸ Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

²⁹ Nadia Delicata, "Natural Law in a Digital Age," *Journal of Moral Theology* 4, no.1 (2015): 1-24.

³⁰ N. Katherine Hayles recognizes that through our new technological dependencies we can conceive the post-human through an account where "emergence replaces teleology; reflexive epistemology replaces objectivism; distributed cognition replaces autonomous will; embodiment replaces a body seen as a support system for the mind; and a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines replaces the liberal humanist subject's manifest destiny to dominate and control nature," Nancy Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 288.

³¹ Eric McLuhan notes that since "alphabetic literacy" is no longer the ground of western culture, "as with the Hydra (once her head was lopped off, new heads sprang up in its place),

In this new search for meaning, do we dare to go beyond our constructed universes, to follow an inherent desire for Truth with a renewed wonder? Do we retrieve reason as symbol? Or do we remain sceptical, trapped in Narcissistic simulacra?

How Do We Unveil Reason after its Eclipse?

Bernard Lonergan's transcendental method,³² whose end can be succinctly put as "objectivity is true subjectivity," can be seen to offer a bridge between realist and subjectivist philosophy and hence, the possibility of retrieving *recta ratio* after the radical turn to the subject. According to Lonergan, reason must in fact be retrieved through three radical "conversions": intellectual, moral, religious. The three conversions (or, more accurately, three modes of *one* conversion) are a disciplined, and therefore "consciously appropriated," search for truth, prudential action and most crucially, openness to the Transcendent, the pre-condition for true conversion. In other words, Lonergan insists on a path from unreasonableness to being reasonable, from disordered freedom to ordered (and therefore "realist") freedom and most importantly, to an assent to the beckoning of Being that transforms the way we come to know through granting the gift of insight.

Intellectual conversion implies a two-fold awakening: first, the appropriation of the cognitive operations of coming to know, experiencing rightly, understanding rightly and judging rightly, which parallel the Ricoeurian arc of interpretation from first naïveté to critical reflection to second naïveté. Second, "judgment" or "conviction" implies the assent that "I know (something)" and therefore that "*I am* a knower." Authentic, free action follows being, but cognitive dissonance reveals that beliefs tend to follow actions. Thus consciously appropriating acts of reason becomes a pre-condition for attesting to the truth that "I am reasonable" (and not merely a "thinker").

so with Literacy: now we see dozens, nay entire litters of (small-"I") little literacies springing up spontaneously here and there with evident abandon." Yet, following his father, Marshall McLuhan, he also proposes a solution to the impasse: "So we are now in the delightful position that traditional (capital-L) Literacy is now counter-cultural in the West" - implying that traditional "Literacy", in particular through the arts of the trivium, is necessary to re-stabilize culture from the destabilizing effects of hyperliteracy (modernity) and post-literacy (our times). See "Literacy in a New Key," in *Proceedings of the Media Ecology Association* 10 (2009), http://www.media-ecology.org/publications/MEA_proceedings/v10/3_literacies.pdf.

³² Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 265; Bernard J.F. Lonergan, Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

In turn, critically appropriating that attestation of “being” demands the ordering of freedom, of our life, according to that conviction. If I am a knower, I can act intelligently. If I am reasonable, I *must* act reasonably. As Paul Ricoeur notes, “moral conversion” is the awakening of *phronesis* birthed through conviction about the self and the other.³³ Hence, truth as judged in conscience becomes a “categorical imperative” for the reasonable person. The essence of prudence is orthopraxis.

But in a world of relativistic systems of meaning where the possibility of one ordering Logos/truth itself is denied, the power of reasoning itself needs conversion. The transformation of worldview and of us as knowers demands a reawakening to reason-as-“true” symbol in the re-encounter with the Other who expands our awareness of reality. Hence, under the veil of hubris, “our only hope is apocalypse.”³⁴

This evocative phrase from Marshall McLuhan reminds that Christians live in hope -not mere optimism or pessimism. As a wise teacher of mine used to put it: “The difference between a philosopher and a theologian is that a theologian knows how the story ends.”³⁵ Christians know that optimism and pessimism about the human predicament are irrelevant, since we live in the hope that humanity *is* saved; that the presence of the Holy Spirit *is* among us. Even more profoundly, our hope is grounded in the knowledge that God reveals Godself to us; that the Being who beckons and to whom we respond is the Word of God. Ours is not a (mere) reasonable (human) conviction; it is the supernatural gift of faith.

Faith, as conviction born of the assent to the power of the Holy Spirit brings with it enormous responsibility: to reflect “light” in the world enslaved in darkness. In a world that has substituted symbol for simulacrum, in a world that denies we can know God, it is more imperative than ever that disciples of Christ - those who, with the Apostle claim, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20) - *witness* the Good News. “God has come to the world;” “God has taken on flesh;” “God is with us” is the fundamental truth we proclaim.

But to break through simulacra and recover symbol, we proclaim the Good News first not through words (deemed to be meaningless), nor through fancy

³³ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³⁴ Marshall McLuhan, “Futurechurch: Edward Wakin Interviews Marshall McLuhan,” *U.S. Catholic* 42, no.1 (1977): 6-11. Reprinted as “Our Only Hope Is Apocalypse,” in *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, collected and ed. Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szklarek (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1999), 58-59).

³⁵ Ovey N. Mohammed, S.J., professor emeritus in inter-religious dialogue, Regis College, Toronto, ON.

tools (our new idols). We proclaim it most powerfully through “apocalypse,” through penetrating a veil of hubris by witnessing to and enfleshing Christ-with-us as “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6). Karl Rahner used another evocative phrase that guides the Church in the particular predicament we find ourselves in. “The Christian of the future [of the *present*] will be a mystic or none at all.” Being a mystic implies both a sharper attunement to the presence of the divine, the Holy Spirit in our midst, as well as our divinization through receiving his grace. Vatican II taught this wisdom categorically when it brought to all the faithful’s attention the call to holiness, that there can no longer be a separation between spiritual excellence and mere “morality”. Rather, what needs to shine forth is the Christian character, a Christ-like becoming, that is wise in its ability to discern and participate in the concrete ways the Spirit is re-creating the world, but also inherently persuasive because it reflects true human becoming as communal and creative. To become a saint, to embody the presence of God in the world, to witness to the power of the Holy Spirit that invigorates the Body of Christ, is the hope, the reflection of the true Light the Church brings to the world.

Yet, lest we also come to delude ourselves and to disappear under the veil of hubris, we must keep our feet firmly on the ground and remember that the Church *is*, but also *continues to aspire to be*, a sacrament, a true symbol. The Church “is like” the kingdom of God, the unveiling of divine order. But this implies that she always points beyond herself to God and hence, that she reveals divine order as much as she conceals it. Even more humbly, we must always keep in mind that until the *eschaton*, the Church remains marred by sin while it seeks to be holy. The hope we live by is solely in the power of the Holy Spirit, who reveals holiness in brokenness, just as life, goodness and beauty is revealed through the cross. Being can be revealed in our fragile attempts at becoming more fully human. But how we become more fully human in a “post-human” world is a challenge that requires relentless and fearless discernment - even while we trust that the Holy Spirit continues to encourage and nurture our efforts to submit to his Power in order to become co-creators with him of a New Creation.

The Church’s Task of “Apocalyptic” Presence in the World

From the perspective of the recapitulation of reality inaugurated at Pentecost, our distorted imaginaries of reality as “code” to be manipulated at will, and of the human as fundamentally “spirit” and “discarnate”, and thus “omnipresent”, “eternal” and “omniscient”, reveal not only the unsatisfied primordial desire for becoming like God lurking beneath the show of prowess, but also an ironic “truth” about the silent, invisible ways in which the Spirit has promised to

accompany us to bring forth the *eschaton*. Paradoxically, our bringing to the fore the immateriality of our constructed reality, accentuates how the Spirit's own transformative action is most discernible in the very antimony of nothingness in the midst of seeming fullness.³⁶ When life is deconstructed it reveals itself as simple building blocks. When the virtual world we exist in is deconstructed, it is emptiness. Indeed, when matter itself is deconstructed, we discover "spirit", energy, nothingness. Lurking behind the artisanry, lurking beneath our creativity, lurking beyond our intelligence is the nothingness that is fullness. *Ex nihilo*, "all" comes into being, because Silence is Source, *Arche* of all meaning -and the answer to my personal desire for meaning. Even the experience of the mystic attests to this, as it is precisely a deconstruction of all constructions to reveal Knowledge of the Unknowable God.

From this perspective, the *hubris* expressed in the excesses of *tekhne*, paradoxically opens up new possibilities of teasing out a "good life", a communal path to flourishing in this new digital milieu. First and foremost, the virtual milieu developed on code, suggests the very desire for retrieving symbol as analogical rather than merely logical reason, and thus the reverence, the primordial response of wonder at Being evident through all beings. Just as the temptation is to see ourselves as engineers of all reality, so becoming code-writers can re-establish a profound awe at the wonderful artisanry of God's creation - an artisanry infinitely more magnificent than our own that humbles us anew to recognize the "pattern", the "order", the Wisdom, the Logos and Breath of Life, inherent in the cosmos "emerging" from nothingness to fullness, from code to beauty. As biologist and atheist Stuart Kauffman puts it, the understanding discovered through science intuits how life itself and all its forms manifests a wondrous "emergent creativity" that compels us to "reinvent the sacred."³⁷ Yet if emergent creativity requires the scientist to "read" order and pattern, it awakens a more fundamental conviction that the universe itself is intelligent, the product of Intelligence, and that we can know Meaning because it has revealed itself to us first. Natural theology - what Aquinas calls, our natural inclination to seek truth about God - is the assent to the truth that it is in the face of Logos that our words, our reason, take form.

³⁶The conversation following the presentation of the paper and the scriptural reflection on 1 Kings: 19 offered by Alexander Vella OCarm inspired this reflection on pastoral orientations for the Church. Just as God appears to Elijah "in the sound of sheer silence" (1 Kgs 19:12) while he waits in the desert, today we are called to wait in the desert to perceive transcendence in nothingness.

³⁷ Stuart A. Kauffman, *Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason, and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

Simultaneously, our wonder at creation, and through creation the intimation of a Creator, reveals reality as so fluid, so malleable, so playful, that it cannot but invite to radical participation. If literacy, in particular in its hyper form emerging in the Gutenberg era, taught detachment, the radical separation of subject and object, today, we are profoundly aware that we cannot be detached observers any more. Our nature - and Christ's gift of salvation in the sending of the Holy Spirit confirms it - is to be co-creators, participants in the transformation to New Creation. Yet the Creator does not create randomly. Logos took flesh to manifest categorically how intelligibility in creation is revealed in materiality, how matter is not mere camouflage or accident, but the very form of intelligibility. Lest we repeat the errors of Gnosticism, where flesh is denigrated as corrupt, and its reversal in Nominalism, where material "word" is divorced from essence, the Church ought to repeat its fundamental teachings that not only the essence of earthly things, of the universe, cannot be separated from their materiality, but that materiality, creation, is itself "good". Hence, why the Church teaches not only the unity of the human as body, psyche and spirit, but also our resurrection in the flesh echoing Christ's own "enfleshed" triumph over death. Our creativity, our participation in the recreation of the earth, cannot be separated from the limits and possibilities imposed by the material substratum itself. It is through reverence for the order already manifest in materiality that we can drink from its Wisdom, participate in its creativity, and properly fulfill our call to be stewards of the earth and its co-creators. Just as the tragedy of our times is the ecological disorder as corrupt fruit of our blindness to the dynamism of Nature, so the threat of virtuality is a disregard of (and disrespect for) the real limits posed on our creatures - and human nature - as embodied and finite.

Participation in the emergent creativity of the cosmos, however, is not just a call to responsible artisanry. It is more extraordinary still the task of becoming a community in imitation of God's own *koinonia*. The desire for unity, the thrust to web-like interaction evident in our digital technologies, verifies how our hopes can only be fulfilled in inter-relation and collaboration. Our nature as social beings attests that we are fundamentally "persons" seeking to be bonded in relationship.³⁸ Just as we become selves in our awakening in awe to a Transcendent "Other", so we reach out to others in the search for truth and its actualization. Nevertheless, the ideal of community, of society, cannot be reduced to a new form of communism or collectivism. We do not become one through becoming

³⁸ For a brief overview of contemporary philosophies of "personalism" made popular in particular by Pope John Paul II, see Thomas D. Williams and Jan Olof Bengtsson, "Personalism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2013 ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/personalism/>.

a herd, but because our nature, our reason, our desire *commands* it and thus, in our freedom and with prudence, we seek to actualize it in particular in the political sphere. Personhood, not tribe, remains the ideal sought through our new means of extending the boundaries of the human communion.

Undeniably, the Church, whose tradition has relied and perfected these three ways of “symbol”, “emergent creativity” and “connectivity” in significant and different ways throughout its history,³⁹ has much to contribute to contemporary culture in reinventing the ways to harness their potential for the common good today. Hence, by reflecting our inherent desire for Being today, the three ways also suggest general pastoral emphases for the Church that are both traditional in their orientation, but also call for innovation in their execution. Recovering our inherent ability to symbolize, pondering the wisdom of emergent creativity and enhancing human relations among ourselves, with other creatures and with God, suggest that to fulfill its mission of proclaiming-by-embodying the “form” of human flourishing, the Church in the digital age is likewise called to the triple task of bridging, through a process of dialogue, the many faces of the one Truth that emerge from multiple narratives/metaphors/symbols of humanity’s search for meaning. It is called to participate in, and even lead, a project of cultural artisanry inspired by a desire for beauty. It is called to model friendship as the human personal ideal of mutual generous self-giving.

These traditional orientations of ecclesial ministry, however, demand specific pastoral initiatives that counteract the challenges of the times. Increased tribalism, paradoxically divorced from the flesh, demands that the renewal of culture must rest first and foremost on personal “presence”, the integrity of self as contrary to the fragmentary post-human myth. Dialogue implies the return of the priority of the word as spoken, as event, that necessitates personal participation and therefore the exchange of selves that builds friendships. Yet, true presence in a digital milieu is revealed more and more as a state that needs to be cultivated, as a giving of self that is wondrous, but that demands the care and attention of a properly “liturgical” setting, through rituals (and therefore “embodied” communication) that marks its sacredness. Holy spaces, holy times, are precisely those carved out of the “ubiquitous connectivity and pervasive proximity”⁴⁰ that

³⁹ From the sacraments to sacred art, the Church has relied on symbol as revealedness of the holy. Theology is in itself the process of seeking to interpret the words that God speaks about Godself in creation and the scriptures. This never-ending task is thus one of ever-radical emergence. Lastly, the Church’s ideal - and therefore, fundamental character - of being a communion of saints and the body of Christ in the world, is the task of forming disciples of Christ into persons who love each other as he loved us first.

⁴⁰ Mark Federman, “Why Johnny and Janey Can’t Read, and why Mr. and Ms. Smith

characterizes our digital life. The return of leisureliness to time, and of profundity to space, allows presence to be nurtured through the exchange of narratives that fuse horizons of meaning, and thus persuade and convince about the richness-yet-frailty of the self-and-other in relationship, birthing practical wisdom, or mindful action in responsibility.

This ethical stance of mindfulness and presence, of deep awareness of the self and other in their integral relationality can be understood as the true human character born in self-giving that recapitulates the ideal of divine-humanity in the digital age. It reflects the perennial excellence of humbly seeking the truth, through fashioning beauty, while bonded in communion. Nevertheless, our times are like a hall of mirrors, where it is precisely the discernment of what is true, good and beautiful that is at stake. Hence, since reality is not always what it seems, the need for vigilance - ultimately, for the task of re-creating culture - must be expressed in a *habitus* of truly paying attention and thus, of practising a discipline of constantly interpreting the signs of the times with fresh eyes. More than ever, the world teaches us that we cannot be limited by our conceptions of Being or reality, and thus by our assumptions of what is true and good. In a world where the environment, our lifestyles and technological prowess are radically novel, above all, we need the humility to unceasingly reconsider probable truths, evaluate their veracity and thus deliberate over action for the common good. At the same time, emboldened by the gifts of Pentecost and through trust in human reason that can participate in Divine Wisdom, we can arrive to tentative speculative and moral judgments and, more crucially, to prudential action. While the world craves for certainty and desires moral guidance, a Church that jumps to immediate moralizing based on assumptions of the past, is not only out-of-touch with the world, but paradoxically, is perceived as scandalously confused and paralyzed by fear. Hence, the challenge of moral leadership is precisely that of being a persuasive public presence that argues boldly and convincingly for prudential decisions based on intelligent deliberation after a careful consideration of all the information emerging from our complex contexts. Anything less, and the Church itself becomes a stumbling block, rather than teacher, of moral discernment in the service of cultural artisanry.

Simultaneously, since these are confusing times, there will be moments when the Church's wisest stance is precisely that of waiting patiently before there can emerge a *sensus fidelium* of coherent judgments about how God is revealing Godself in our midst. As we are more intricately interconnected, as we are exposed

Can't Teach: The Challenge of Multiple Media Literacies in a Tumultuous Time" (Public Lecture, University of Toronto, 2005), <http://individual.utoronto.ca/markfederman/WhyJohnnyandJaneyCantRead.pdf>.

to multiple cultures and lifestyles, as the Church itself is universal in its radical diversities, we are confronted by an infinitely complex task of interpreting and analyzing radically dissimilar - and even novel - human experiences mediated by new technologies. In these moments, when we are still, collectively and individually, learning to drink anew from the Wisdom emerging in our midst, not only do we seek to evaluate and learn from the multiple but still insufficient attestations of Being. We must also go beyond the kataphatic, to re-enter the desert and simply be still. Only then can we attempt to “savour” Silence, to “share” in Nothingness, to “be one” to Emptiness, to purge our notions of self, other and God through “listening” with fresh ears to the Good News echoing in our midst. Only from Silence do new narratives emerge - narratives that do not deny the fragmentary truths discovered in our past, but that call for their continuation of the telling of our “human story of salvation” in the present. The silent Church is thus not an irrelevant Church because seemingly invisible. It is the leaven that waits patiently until it can start multiplying vigorously to raise the bread to be broken for all.

Indeed, if the mission of the Church is to be a reflection of the Light in the world, then its challenge is first and foremost internal in order to shine forth in the world. Hence, why Vatican II also demanded that to face its challenges in the contemporary world, the Church must retrieve, while renewing, the wisdom and methods of tending and forming the flock that appear to have become eclipsed through the times. This was the spirit of the reforms in the liturgy, catechesis (in particular, with the renewed emphasis on the catechumenate) and moral theology, a conscious re-turn and re-invigoration through the life-giving sources of Scripture and Tradition.

But while, in these past five decades, worship, teaching and ministry have undergone radical changes, the world continues to demand ethical exemplars, continues to be confused in its discernment of symbol from simulacra, continues to hunger for true worship of the Transcendent. Culture today might be in radical flux, but the Church’s task of reflecting on the complex dynamism of evangelizing in the specificity of particular cultures is not novel. Rather, it is always renewed and reinvented because it is always required. Yet, every process of rebirth, of developing sensitivity to the ways the Spirit is already blowing in our midst, necessitates shedding old wineskins to make sure the ever-new wine is not lost.

The challenge of our post-literate times might be precisely that of discerning how much of the “literate” heritage that has shaped the traditional “western” Church is essential to the witness of the Gospel in the new reality of today, and how much “old skin” can be discarded. Put otherwise, what is it that makes

us “one, holy, catholic, apostolic” in union with fellow Christians? Oneness, holiness, unity, rootedness in the original witness of the resurrection and Pentecost, and thus of the presence of the Holy Spirit that makes us Body of Christ, is the essence of *ecclesia*. It is that essence that the world desires; that essence that we hope to reveal ever more transparently.

Nadia Delicata
Department of Moral and Spiritual Theology,
Faculty of Theology,
University of Malta,
Msida MSD 2080
Malta

nadia.delicata@um.edu.mt