

Blessed John Paul II promoted 'civilization of love'

“Professor Buttiglione is among the most prominent Catholic intellectuals in Italian and European public life today – and one of the most controversial, on account of his spirited advocacy of Europe’s Christian intellectual and moral heritage,” said John Henry Crosby, this October about Rocco Buttiglione. Crosby was announcing Buttiglione as the first person to serve as a Distinguished Visiting Scholar of the Dietrich von Hildebrand Legacy Project.

On October 21 in Steubenville, Ohio, Buttiglione gave the inaugural Dietrich and Alice von Hildebrand Lecture on Philosophy and Culture, “My Friendship with a Saint: What Blessed John Paul II Taught me About Christian Witness.” Back in 2004, Buttiglione had clashed with the European Union’s technocrats who, because of his explicitly Catholic positions on homosexuality and marriage, rejected him as vice-president of the European Commission.

Technocrats have consistently embraced a global civilization heralded by technological advances: a “new world order” of civilization, upending and redefining cen-



turies-old laws and customs. Nonetheless, the Catholic Church has an important reminder for humanity about civilization: it presents a challenge about culture.

The philosopher Roger Scruton has pointed out in his analysis of modern culture how culture (*Kultur*) was first distinguished from civilization (*Zivilisation*) by the German writer Johann Gottfried von Herder in the 18th century. Herder saw culture as the lifeblood of a people, the moral energy of a society. Civilization, in contrast, was society’s veneer of manners, law, and technology. The German romantics after Herder (Schelling, Schiller, Fichte, Hegel, and Hölderlin) accepted this distinction, and saw culture as the essence of a nation. Culture, they said, is the spiritual force in a nation’s customs, beliefs, and practices; it is articulated in art, religion, and history. This romantic view of culture is a particularist view of culture exemplified by many of those political actors who today

protest against globalization. They want to protect any nation’s “common culture” against supranational schemes detrimental to particular, national culture.

There is also a classical *universalist* view of culture, exemplified by the cosmopolitans of the political scene. This view derives not from Herder, says Scruton, but from Wilhelm von Humboldt, founder of the modern university. Herder saw culture as a natural growth; Humboldt saw it as cultivation. For Humboldt, not everyone possesses culture, because not everyone has the leisure, inclination, or ability. Hence a university-educated elite preserves, enhances, and passes on culture.

Globalization and the Internet now signal the disappearance of Humboldt’s ideal of “high culture” guarded by an educated elite. So what then has replaced it? Increasingly, as with the role of the Internet technologies like Twitter and Facebook during the recent “Arab Spring,” the technocratic elite looks naively to an imminent advance in civilization through globalization and the Internet. This advance, they say, is the destiny of all nations, rich or

poor. According to Herder’s distinction, however, this is only an advance in technology, an advance in economic *Zivilisation*, not in *Kultur*.

Therefore, Pope John Paul II made it a special point of his papacy to remind everyone of the Force that must be present in the new global economy: “Solidarity.” Promoting a “civilization of love” is the Christian response to the secularization of the modern world. Without love, without the force of solidarity, a global civilization connected by the Internet pursues only money – which is an empty pursuit.

In addition to a “civilization of love,” John Paul II also famously called for a “culture of life.” This may sound strange to someone familiar with Herder’s distinction. After all, for Herder, culture is the inner life of a nation, and technology is only the civilized outer shell; for Herder, culture is life.

Why then is the papacy calling for a “culture of life,” which, to Herder’s ear, is nothing more than a call for “a culture of culture”? The reason is that Humboldt’s ideal of elite “high culture” is being replaced by democratized “popular culture.” Globalization and the Internet are ship-

ping a new kind of culture, a global “popular culture,” around the globe.

That is, Herder’s “common culture” is vanishing just as much as Humboldt’s “high culture,” now that globalization and the Internet serve up “popular culture” to the modern world. In John Paul II’s view, this “popular culture” is all too often “a culture of death.” Similarly, Pope Francis calls today’s popular culture a “throwaway culture.”

Therefore, John Paul II famously called for: “A culture of life.” Rightly fearful of the global imposition of a supranational culture, concerned citizens of all nations everywhere ought to devise this as an antidote to the global “popular culture.”

The problem with “popular culture” is that it is often agnostic about truth, being dependent on a democratic and anti-elitist marketplace. Thus, in “throwaway culture,” any artifact or activity is cultural, as long as it forms a sense of common identity. Any lifestyle choice is acceptable, be-

cause cultural identity is now simply bought at the store, or online with the approving click of a mouse. For Catholics, this is unacceptable. Surely some artifacts and activities are antithetical to true culture. They lead to death, not to life.

Set before us, in the 21st century, are the ways of globalization and the Internet, and the modern problems that come with them concerning culture and civilization. Are we cultivating a “culture of life” in solidarity with all human beings – including the weakest and most defenseless, like the unborn in the womb? Or are we being swept along by the “popular culture” of the information age – and thereby enslaved to a throwaway culture?

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