

The Challenges of Evangelizing a Technological Society

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One of the most popular shows on television today is the sitcom, *Seinfeld*, a comedy about the daily life of a stand-up comedian, Jerry Seinfeld, and his three friends. Early in the history of that show there was a humorous episode in which Jerry and his friend George go to a major network to pitch an idea for a sitcom about (surprise!)...a comedian and his three friends. The center-piece of their proposal, as George insists, is that the show be about "nothing." The humor of the scene comes from George's resolute insistence that the show be sustained by nothing other than everyday encounters and happenings among the four main characters. The scene works as comedy only because of the shared assumption that everyday life is boring, mundane, bearing insufficient weight, even if only comic weight, to sustain a TV series.

There is much in modern western culture to support the assumption that happiness lies in escaping the mundane, if by "mundane" we mean the ordinary and repeatable tasks and human interactions which constitute the rhythms of daily life. Much of this is the by-product of our increasingly consumerist culture and the advertising industry. Ever more sophisticated marketing strategies promise freedom from the shackles of hum drum existence if only we purchase a certain product or service. Yet if the engine of consumerism is the advertising industry, its promise lies in modern technology. As the social philosopher Albert Borgmann has pointed out [*Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984)], we are attracted to modern technology precisely because it offers us freedom from the mundane processes

and daily interactions necessary for the procurement of goods, and freedom for the greater enjoyment of those goods. Borgmann claims that the primary goal of the technological device is to "disburden" us. Central heating is much less burdensome than a wood-burning stove, for example. A TV dinner is less burdensome than fixing a home cooked meal and listening to a pre-recorded piano sonata is less burdensome than learning to play the piece yourself. In each instance, what we are freed from is the burden of time and energy wasted in procuring a commodity which can be more efficiently produced, without our effort, by modern technology. The assumption is that the commodity has a value in itself which can be extracted from the normal processes by which we procure the commodity: the comfort of heat extracted from the maintenance of a fire, the pleasures of a good meal separated from meal preparation, the pleasures of music separated from singing or playing an instrument.

If this analysis illuminates some of the principal contours of ordinary existence in a technological, consumerist society, then the success of the church's mission to evangelize modern society depends on its ability to read these particular "signs of the times" and respond accordingly.

The Evangelization of Culture

One of the hallmarks of the present pontificate is the call for a new evangelization of culture in which we seek not just the conversion of individuals but the transformation of society itself into a "civilization of love" [cf. Pope John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris* (1984), #30; *Christifideles laici* (1988), #54; *Tertio millennio adveniente* (1994), #52; *Evangelium vitae* (1995), # 27]. However, the effectiveness of this evangelization largely depends on our ability to gauge the shape of daily existence in a world profoundly influenced by consumerism and technology. In my experience, the preaching and pastoral ministry of the church have been woefully unequipped to speak to these most fundamental dimensions of human existence.

What the church offers the world is the gospel of salvation. In fact, according to Vatican II, the church is itself the "universal sacrament of salvation" (cf. *Lumen gentium* #48, *Ad gentes* #1, *Gaudium et spes* #45). By salvation I do not mean some privatized salvation of souls, but the salvation of humankind which embraces the personal, social, political and economic spheres of human existence. As a sacrament of salvation the church offers a vision of human fulfillment which is, we believe, the life of grace. For Christians, the life of grace cannot mean an escape from the mundane and the crass increase in the consumption of goods. Grace comes to us, not as some quantifiable commodity, but within our most basic human interactions with one another and our world.

The fundamental insight of the doctrine of the trinity is that God's being is essentially relational. The Johannine tradition expresses this (without, of course, anything like a developed trinitarian theology) in its simplest and yet most ontologically profound of affirmations: "God is love." It follows that, as beings created in the image and likeness of God, our salvation comes as we "put on Christ" and allow our lives to be patterned after the loving, generative and reciprocal relationality which is the very being of God as revealed to us in Christ by the power of the Spirit. In the Eastern Christian tradition, this account of our salvation is called *theosis* or *divinization*. We might also call this capacity to share in the divine life of God, *spiritual communion*. But this *spiritual communion* does not demand an escape from our world. Rather, our participation in *spiritual communion* comes in our authentic engagement in the multi-faceted web of human relationships which constitute our historical existence. This life of communion is disclosed in the Genesis creation stories in which we discover the call to the life of communion in our basic need for human companionship and in the demand for faithful stewardship of the earth itself. Salvation

is concerned with the transformation and empowerment of our capacity for authentic engagement with God, others and the world itself.

The arena in which we work out our salvation and seek after God is bounded by the patterns and practices of daily living. Consequently, the gospel of salvation stands in direct confrontation to the overarching ethos of our consumerist culture. It stands as a challenge to the seduction of modern technology which seeks to render the world around us, and time itself subject to our manipulation and control. It is this gospel of salvation which must be proclaimed with renewed vigor by the church. The effective proclamation of this gospel demands, I contend, the cultivation of a new Christian mystagogy and a new asceticism.

A Mysticism of Ordinary Life

If our technological, consumer culture is concerned with maximizing the acquisition and consumption of goods, Christianity insists by way of contrast that the encounter with grace does not come by escaping the mundane in the acquisition of goods but by cultivating an attentiveness to the numerous mediations of grace that suffuse our ordinary life. It is the poets as much as the theologians who have captured this attentiveness to grace. Recall Elisabeth Barrett Browning's poetic evocation of the sacredness of the created world for those who have eyes to see it:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes--
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries
And daub their natural faces unaware
More and more from the first similitude.
If a man could feel,

Not one day, in the artist's ecstasy,
But everyday, feast, fast, or working-day,
The spiritual significance burn through
The hieroglyphic of material shows,
Henceforward he would paint the globe with wings,
And reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree,
And even his very body as a man...

--Elisabeth Barrett Browning

This is affirmed as well in T.S. Eliot's meditation on the hiddenness of the incarnation:

For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is
Incarnation....

--T.S Eliot

What these poets call for is an attentiveness to the ordinary dimensions of human existence through which the divine is disclosed. Attentiveness here means a stance of watchful engagement

with our world in trusting expectation that the graciousness of life will manifest itself through this engagement.

Among theologians, perhaps no one has done more to highlight the graced character of every aspect of human existence than Karl Rahner. Rahner's transcendental analysis of human existence led him to reject any extrinsic theology of grace as a merely episodic intervention of God in a fundamentally profane world. Rahner affirmed that in the basic dynamisms of the human spirit in questioning, loving, hoping and acting, God was always already present as Holy Mystery. God is the absolute depth and infinite horizon of any truly human experience [Karl Rahner, "The Experience of God Today," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 11 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 154]. While known for his often dense and even opaque philosophical theology, Rahner could write movingly of God's luminous presence in the human experiences of loneliness, the courageous acceptance of death, the unconditional offer of forgiveness, the sheer delight of human laughter, etc. For Rahner it was the task of the church to "point ever anew to this basic experience of God..." [Rahner, "The Experience of God Today," 164-5]. Rahner was convinced that the very future of Christianity depended on its ability to bring the ordinary believer to an appreciation of the presence of mystery in daily living:

The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all. If by mysticism we mean, not singular para-psychological phenomena, but a genuine experience of God emerging from the heart of existence, this statement is very true and its truth and importance will become still clearer in the spirituality of the future [Karl Rahner, "The Spirituality of the Church of the Future," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20 (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 149].

The final stage in the rite of Christian Initiation for Adults is called Mystagogia. It is the time between Easter and Pentecost in which the neophytes, having just celebrated the Easter

sacraments, are immersed in the mysteries of the Christian faith. Following the lead of Rahner, I suggest that what we need today is a new "mystagogy" in which humankind is guided to a greater realization of the graced dimensions of daily human existence. This mystagogy would go beyond traditional appeals to some set of widely accepted religious practices (e.g., reading the bible, the celebration of the sacraments, the practice of pious devotions) to features of ordinary human life which are all too often overlooked in traditional Christian spirituality. At the same time, these are the features of ordinary human life which are most affected by technology's flattening out of the rich texture of human relationships.

Let me offer two examples. I was recently a dinner guest at a friend's house when another guest recounted a family outing this past Fourth of July. They were celebrating the holiday on the beach of Lake Michigan. As the sun went down you could see small campfires marking the beach at regular intervals as one gazed up and down the long stretch of sand. The campfires cast shadows of family and friends at play. Then out of nowhere, fireworks began to shoot off into the night sky. Some were quite beautiful, others were barely visible. Families spontaneously gathered to coordinate this incendiary display and applaud one another's efforts. Of course none of this matched the sheer spectacle of commercial fireworks displays with their sophisticated computer timing set to the sounds of the 1812 overture or some such thing. But as she stepped back to gaze up and down the beach at the dancing flames of campfires and the fireworks illuminating the night sky, she listened to the rhythmic sound of waves nestling up to the beach, and children playing tag in the sand, and felt blessed by the moment. This moment, with its unique composition of a spontaneous experience of human community, the haunting beauty of evening campfires on the beach, and the simple delight of children at play, was for her as surely an encounter with grace as was her Sunday participation in the eucharist.

Let me offer another example from my own life. When my wife Diana and I had our twin boys, David and Andrew, I was just completing my doctoral studies. In the first few months we were up repeatedly in the night to feed the babies, change their diapers, etc. I recall one evening, awakening in the middle of the night to feed one of the babies and change his diaper. On this particular occasion, however, I was grasped by a profound awareness which has always been somewhat difficult to describe. I realized that right then, changing my son's diaper, I was doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing; I was engaged in an action as vital and fundamental as any I would have in my life. It was a mundane action, a tad unpleasant, part of the daily routine that generally went without significant discussion in our lives. But that basic action of care for our child engaged me in one of life's most vital relationships, a parent nurturing a child. That encounter with my son was surely a graced moment.

I contend that the mystagogical ministry of the church lies precisely in laying bare fundamental connections between, on the one hand, church doctrine and sacramental life, and on the other hand ordinary events like those which transpired on the beach of Lake Michigan or on my living room floor. In a society in which the goal of much technology is to free us from the mundane burdens and discomforts of diaper changes and improvised fireworks displays, the effective evangelization of culture demands the a reaffirmation of the graced dimension of the clumsy, messy and somewhat improvisational events of ordinary life. Accompanying this new mystagogy must be a renewal of a Christian asceticism appropriate to our times.

A New Asceticism

At the heart of the Christian faith is the proclamation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, what came to be known in our liturgical tradition as "the paschal mystery." For Christians the cross and resurrection of Christ are not simply significant events punctuating, as it

were, the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather in the death and resurrection of Christ the distinctive pattern of Christ's manner of living, and the distinctive content of his message, were fully disclosed. In his ministry and teaching and in his dying and rising Christ revealed to us a pattern of living which offers the possibility of salvation. This life-death-life pattern becomes for us a saving pedagogy. The Gospel of John captures its essence:

I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me (John 12: 24-26).

In baptism we are drawn into Christ's own death and resurrection and through the life of faith we submit to this saving pedagogy in the imitation of Christ. The working out of our salvation is a matter of making this the characteristic pattern of our lives.

The church should be for us the spiritual school in which we hope to internalize, if you will, the life-death-life pattern of the paschal mystery. Another term for the pedagogy by which this pattern is internalized is *askesis* or asceticism. Louis Bouyer wrote in his classic work, *Introduction to Spirituality*, "Christian asceticism...is simply the systematic adaptation of our whole life to this Mystery [the paschal mystery] which should become its soul" [(Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1961), 124]. By asceticism or *askesis* then I mean the concrete discipline by which we enter into the paschal mystery in our daily living.

For the martyrs of the early church, their witness to the power of the paschal mystery took the most dramatic form imaginable; it was through the free offering of their very lives that they gave eloquent and sometimes shocking testimony to the power of the cross and resurrection. The witness of the early martyrs eventually gave way to the asceticism of monastic and consecrated

religious life. Those who embraced the public profession of the evangelical counsels interpreted the significance of their lives in the light of the kenosis or self-emptying of Christ. To make vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and sometimes stability, was to freely accept the limitations which these vows imposed, but it was also to recognize that through this free embrace would come life eternal. If asceticism often has been associated with unhealthy exercises in self-mortification, the essential truth was nevertheless preserved that in the Christian life, pain, suffering, emptiness, loneliness, and even boredom--the so called negative characteristics of human existence--must be embraced as part of the fabric of historical human existence. Moreover, only through the free embrace of these negativities of human existence could life's graciousness likewise be embraced.

Perhaps surprisingly, one of the more insightful meditations on this paschal life-death-life rhythm is found in the journals of a young Jewish woman, Etty Hillesum, as she reflected on the persecution and suffering she experienced under Nazi occupation:

When I say: I have come to terms with life, I don't mean I have lost hope. What I feel is not hopelessness, far from it.... By 'coming to terms with life' I mean: the reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death, by my looking death in the eye and accepting it, by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability. It sounds paradoxical: by excluding death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it [Etty Hillesum *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-43* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1981), 159].

The principal danger of modern consumerism in our technological society is that it offers the avoidance of the "deathly" dimension of ordinary daily life. There is, after all, a shadow side to the recent health craze reflected in the flourishing of gyms, health clubs and in-home/office

exercise equipment. This shadow lies in the not so subtle dependence on the western obsession with youth that fails to embrace the graced possibilities of aging and the natural diminishment of bodily capacities. Too few today recognize the wisdom of Hillesum's conviction that the free embrace of death as a part of life "enlarges and enriches" our lives.

Just as I believe we are in need of a "new" mystagogy, I also believe the church requires a "new" asceticism which would explicitly affirm that the pattern of the Christian way of life-death-life is sacramentally first disclosed to us in baptism and is consequently demanded of all believers. We find "life" only by faithful love of others and the free embrace of the inevitable small "deaths" that the way of love and commitment brings. The witness of the martyrs and those who publicly commit themselves to the evangelical counsels continues to contribute to the pedagogy of the ordinary believer. However, a "new" asceticism will look to exemplary manners of living out the paschal mystery more readily associated with the lifestyles of the vast majority of people today. The primary model for this new asceticism, I believe, is Christian marriage.

The sacrament of marriage has from the very beginning of Christianity been shrouded in ambiguity and suspicion. It was not generally viewed as a sacrament until the eleventh century, and significant disagreements over the proper minister of the sacrament, the proper "sacramental matter" and the proper "ends" or "goods" of the sacrament substantially obscured its evangelical value. A new asceticism requires that the paschal character of sacramental marriage be more fully recognized.

In most contemporary theologies of marriage, the sacramentality of marriage lies in the free self-gift of husband and wife to one another. This self-gift is thought to find its most profound expression in the intimate self-gift of conjugal relations. The symbolic power of conjugal intimacy certainly cannot be denied. However, this focus on the symbolic power of sexual union has also

led to a certain preoccupation with marital sexuality in the Catholic tradition. However, the sacramentality of marriage should not be limited to the intimate self-giving of husband and wife in sexual union; it is also disclosed in the free embrace of the loneliness and sense of absence that are also part of marriage.

In marriage, two people exchange vows, freely entering into a permanent covenantal relationship with one another. As with consecrated religious life, the heart of this commitment, its spiritual core, is the freely accepted decision to embrace the limits which these vows impose. The widespread romanticization of love and marriage (and both church and society have contributed in their own ways to this romanticization) has done much to obscure the ascetical character of Christian sacramental marriage. The faithful living of matrimonial vows involves a fundamental re-direction away from the search for happiness in the breadth of human experience and the accumulation of "peak experiences"--the maximization of the consumption of goods, to use the language employed earlier. In marriage, as with any ascetical practice, there is a free renunciation of goods. Those who would consider marriage, survey the wide range of possible human relationships in which the many blessings of human and sexual intimacy may be found, and renounce them in favor of the exclusive marital intimacy to be cultivated with their spouse. This is a freely chosen limitation and might be characterized as an option for the exploration of the depth of human experience over the breadth of human experience. For while each spouse brings significant personal gifts to the marriage, those gifts are finite and in time each spouse will become aware, often painfully aware, of what the other partner does not and cannot bring. For every time that one's spouse is graciously present and attentive in a time of need, there will be a time of real or emotional absence.

An authentic theology of sacramental marriage must emphasize the sacramental significance, not only of marital intimacy but of this sense of absence, longing and the embrace of the limits of the relationship. When this sense of lack or absence is not embraced, the result is infidelity either in the form of actual adultery or through the many "small exits" by which we avoid the inevitable experiences of emptiness, disappointment and longing. However, when spouses freely accept the limits of the marital relationship, when they choose to love even out of the emptiness, in so doing they unite themselves with Christ, enter into the paschal rhythm of life-death-life and work out their salvation.

What I am proposing is that the graciousness and sacramentality of married life is not limited to expressions of marital intimacy. In this free embrace of emptiness and loneliness, the married couple stands before the whole Christian community as an exemplar of the life of discipleship. As martyres (those who give testimony) if you will, of the paschal mystery, married couples give witness to the reality that we open ourselves up to the possibility of grace and blessing not by transcending finitude and limitation through a kind of technological sleight of hand, but through the free and faithful embrace of finitude and limitation. As will be readily apparent, this is quite different from that romantic vision of marriage in which the marital relationship is one of uninterrupted bliss, warmth and intimacy. The new asceticism of sacramental marriage challenges modern society's erroneous assumption that the limitation of choice and the free acceptance of the burdens and even loneliness of human commitment are obstacles in the pursuit of happiness.

What I have tried to offer in this article is an account of two elements of the Christian tradition, mystagogy and asceticism, which can be retrieved and put to the service of an evangelization of culture. This new evangelization offers a gospel of salvation which challenges

the forces of consumerism and technology which numb us to the possibility of conversion and the experience of grace. Both this new mystagogy and new asceticism are grounded in the basic Christian conviction that grace, blessing and the possibility of salvation come to us not in the progressive manipulation of time and maximization of consumption. Rather, they come to us in the conscious attentiveness to the signals of the divine which glimmer in basic human engagements and the free acceptance of the constraints of time and the "burdens" of human commitment. The true blessings of life can never be simply "ready at hand" but rather surprise us in the midst of daily living. This then is the central paradox of Christianity which needs to be brought to our technological, consumer driven world: we find human fulfillment precisely when we cease making fulfillment the immediate end of all our actions and instead give ourselves over freely to lives of committed service and love.

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