



Living a Catholic Life

No. 7 *Human Historicity*

“Living a Catholic Life” is a collaboration between Knights of Columbus councils, parishes, grassroots organizations, and The National Catholic Bioethics Center to educate the laity on principles of the moral life and their application.

What we know about *humanity* fills thousands of books, but what ties all these facets of human personality into a unified concept of human nature so that we will know how to relate to the persons who possess that nature? For St. Thomas Aquinas, the term *person* implies several things. First, the human person is a subsistent, autonomous being, so that each of us can say, “I am.” Second, this subsistent being possesses a human individuated nature, which answers the question, “What are you?” Third, all members of the human family, because they have one essentially similar nature with the same basic needs and capacities, have the same basic rights and obligations to each other and to the whole community.

Let us now ask how it might be possible to expand this classical account of the human person so as to do justice to the modern awareness of the historicity of the human person. The medieval world in which Aquinas lived was a relatively uniform world. People were all at least nominally Catholics; the barbarians and infidels were beyond the border. Moreover, the knowledge of history was very vague and largely based on the Bible and a few classical authors. To the contrary, in our times, we are acutely conscious of the long history of our human race and the immense variety of cultures and customs in which humans live. This means that there are not only many points of view, but that each of these is undergoing constant development and that there is a confrontation of many different worldviews and value systems which clash and interpenetrate.

We become aware of what a small part of the human race in the past and present we are and that, in the course of history, our Church has undergone great changes. Christianity as a concrete way of life has taken on many different forms, and at no time has the Church existed as a perfectly unified whole, perfectly one in government, faith, and worship, but it has always had to live in controversy, faction, and schism. This undeniable fact of the historicity of what we always supposed was the most stable reality in our life, our faith, threatens us with religious and moral relativism.

If each of us is limited by the horizons of our culture and our age, what sense is there in talking about “human nature” as if we were talking about one permanent reality? The world of the Bible is not our world. The language and symbols which must have been so meaningful to the Jews, living in a largely rural Israel in the epoch from 1000 BC to AD 100, are so different from those

of 21st century Americans. Even the preacher is often at a loss as to how to translate the ancient message into terms that mean something to him or to his people. What is even more dangerous is that we read into those words our own literal-minded prejudices as if they were the word of God.

Once we have the courage to face this problem of human historicity for the very real and practical problem it is for evangelization, what pastoral applications can we draw from it? Three points, at least, seem to be clear. First, in our teaching and preaching, we must ourselves be able to discriminate between what is essential to faith and what is the product of particular historical conditions. We must not confuse the Gospel with the American way of life nor with the style of piety in which we were raised.

Second, it is an illusion to suppose that mere conservatism will conserve the perennial truth. Trying to freeze the past in a world in flux can only result in killing and crushing the past. To preserve the living truth, it must constantly be retranslated into a new language that can convey its meaning to a world that no longer understands and even misunderstands the old language.

Third, if we are to know the people we serve, we must know them in their historical context, not as if they were specimens in a museum. These human persons are not just what they are, but what they have been and may be. Our ministry cannot be so much directed to a judgment on their present status as Catholics as to the growth that will be possible for them in the future if the groundwork is laid now. Jesus saw in people not so much their actualities as their possibilities.

Thus, it is important for us to make our own the vision of history given by Vatican II in *The Church in the Modern World*. The Council, in telling us to look for “the signs of the times,” was asking us to open ourselves to prophetic discernment. The prophets see signs both of doom and of promise, but they read these in a very different way than most of their contemporaries. Whatever gives humankind power to cultivate and improve the world is a gift of God enabling us to be co-creators with him and to carry out the command to Adam “to possess the earth” and to cultivate it (Gen. 1:28). This same power, however, can be abused to destroy the earth and humankind with it. We need prophetic historical insight to be able to distinguish between construction and destruction.