



WHO, AGAIN, ARE THE “MIGHTY” AND THE “RICH”?

Fr. Byron Hagan

“He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty” (Luke 1:52)

ification, hence why we need to pray in the Virgin Mary’s voice, for she alone among all creatures identifies herself totally with the work of God in the world.

We middle-class denizens of the United States of America have an extra special reason to be sober about this, since we are prospering under the system of the wealthiest and most powerful political economy in the history of the human race. We are protected by the most fearsome military in human history, a military which intimidates not only because of its raw power but also because of its global presence—an empire upon which the sun never sets. The global reach of U.S. cultural hegemony is stupefying. Why, even authoritarian regimes inimical to the United States need to present themselves as viable alternatives to the American world-order by attempting to demonstrate that they are as capable of providing military protection and economic prosperity for their people as is the United States. This is a fiction, certainly, but it testifies to the global dominance of the United States that it sets the conditions of rivalry for its rivals. Through a network of formal national alliances and governmental and non-governmental international institutions backed up by unrivaled military force, the United States dictates economic policy not only to poor (“developing”) nations but also to its own

wealthy European allies and even its enemies, who cannot trade on the world market without simultaneously propping up the U.S. dollar, which serves as the global reserve currency. This arrangement, by the way, conveniently allows the United States to pile up a breathtaking (and ever-growing) national debt without (yet!) suffering the consequences. Whether it is immoral for the United States to have gained this power and to work constantly to protect and enhance it is not to the point at present, although that is a question worth asking. The fact is that we do, at least by proxy, sit on a global “throne.” We are the rich and the mighty.

And we dare with a straight face to identify ourselves with the poor and lowly? Yes. This is the privilege of being a member of the Church. But it is only rightfully ours to the degree that we continue to press forward into real identification with the poor Christ, which means an always-greater commitment to a self-examination of our faithfulness (cf. 1 Cor 13:5). But that very faithfulness can, of course, always only come as a gift from the one who became poor and a servant for our sakes.+

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Why Not Be a Beggar?

An Easy Essay by Peter Maurin

1. People who are in need and are not afraid to beg give to people not in need the occasion to do good for goodness' sake.
2. Modern society calls the beggar bum and panhandler and gives him the bum's rush.
3. The Greeks used to say that people in need are the ambassadors of the gods.
4. We read in the Gospel: "As long as you did it to one of the least of My brothers you did it to Me."
5. While modern society calls the beggars bums and panhandlers they are in fact the Ambassadors of God.
6. To be God's Ambassador is something to be proud of.

OUR SPRING SPEAKER SERIES: TOWARD A CHRIST-WELCOMING ‘LOCALISM’

Tyler Hambley

It has often been remarked that the great “scandal” of Christianity is its particularity. The Triune God of the world isn’t knowable through some rational process available to all, nor by a divine spark infused generally into human consciousness, nor even through some globally-witnessed cataclysmic battle, à la those superhero tilts in the movies. Rather, God-with-us reveals himself as an infant boy, hidden, born to a poor Jewish girl and her carpenter husband in the little town of Bethlehem during the reign of Caesar Augustus some 2000 years ago.

Contrary to our modern, democratic sensibilities—that all individuals, nations, and religions start on a level-playing field in a human-led search for “transcendent” deity—the triune God works, rather, on *our behalf* through a highly particular, personal, and, one might say, *local* manner. To reach us, he required *that* Mary, *that* Joseph, and *that* tent-making Saul (turned Paul) on *that* road to Damascus. Indeed, the whole history of *those* elected people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was necessary to extend salvation to all of creation. And so, the “scandal” is that God’s inclusiveness—we might say his *universal* invitation to us—has always been mediated through specific persons, concrete circumstances, and particular localities.

One of the things that belonging to a Church community ought to do to us, then, is to make us capable of loving, and being loved by, those particular persons and locations that play central roles in God’s quest to remake us into his image and likeness. For each Christian, the journey began with something or someone in close proximity. Perhaps it was a work of art, or a spiritual mentor. Perhaps one’s parents or the town wherein one grew up paved the way. Or, maybe it was a significant event

that happened in *this* place and nowhere else, as in the cases of Lourdes or Fatima. Regardless, being locally embedded within such particulars is the necessary condition for God’s self-revelation to us.

But here’s the rub: We increasingly live in a world in which the personal, the concrete, and the local are disappearing. For example, our globalizing economy has turned nearly everything into a franchised monoculture of fast food and strip-mall convenience. Every city now looks basically the same, and that’s true the world over. Hip new clothing, tattoos, and piercings—pitched as “expressions of individuality”—ironically make many people blend in with one another, conforming each to easily-repeatable and marketable patterns.

Reflecting on this situation, the French social critic, Jean Baudrillard, referred to our era as a kind of simulacrum—a copy of a copy of a copy of reality with no identifiable original. Hence, the distinction between what is real and what is artificial rapidly collapses. Within such a climate, it’s no wonder we long for authenticity, yet are frustrated and made cynical in our attempts to find it.

Recently, I visited the small, Kansas town where I grew up. Globalizing forces were already long at work there when I was in high school twenty-five years ago, but for the most part, everyone still knew everyone else. Small mom-and-pop shops marked the store fronts of Main Street. Teachers, coaches, and pastors remained in place for decades. Homes and neighborhoods were beautifully crafted with large, leisurely yards. Public parks played host to frequent community potlucks. Everyone, it seemed, pulled for, and with, everyone else.

Then, Walmart moved into town. Pfizer, along with several other multinational corporations, put manufacturing

plants there. A massive oil refinery provided jobs, but it scarred the land, poisoned the air, and broke up the skyline—all while advancing the “necessity” for local farmers to go in debt pursuing ever larger petroleum-dependent machinery. Worse still, those petroleum, manufacturing, and retail dollars got pumped out of state to faraway investors with no local concern for the good of the community.

Sadly, this story—the death of small town America—is an all too familiar one (and throughout the world for that matter). Young adults like me move away to chase “transcendence” in a bigger “Metropolis” or “Oz” somewhere. New “employees” of the manufacturing plants move in, sure, but they have little connection to the place, so they come and go. Large housing developments mark the outer rim of such towns, but each home is cut from the same cookie-cutter design, stacked tightly in rows and built from manufactured material shipped in from who knows where. In my hometown, many of the old mom-and-pop shops on Main Street have been replaced by franchised chain stores. Even the much beloved local coffee shop went from a unique and original setting for gathering to a wannabe copy of Starbucks—itsself a sterilized copy of a copy with no original. Now, that shop is gone entirely.

And so, little towns like that of my youth move quickly from that which is original, familiar, and grounded to that which is artificial, impersonal, and discardable. Such towns are now little more than spaces to pass *through* on the way to paychecks and self-isolating entertainments via Netflix and Youtube. No longer do people share common life, work, or leisure that binds communities together in any personal or localized manner. Within such a climate, “belief” in God gets reduced

to the production of generic emotional experiences or sentimental platitudes. This ensures that most of the friends I grew up with now hold their ‘Christian’ identity in name only, if at all.

We see, then, that in the destruction of a local economy and culture, personhood itself gets occluded. We are strangers not only to our neighbors, but also to ourselves. For we no longer come to know one another, ourselves, or God through the usual—that is, localized—means by which people historically did so. At most, we collect friendly *acquaintances* online or at work. How, then, can the person, Jesus Christ, God-with-us, ever hope to encounter our diminished and dislocated personhood-turned-*acquaintancehood*?

In contrast, a Christ-welcoming *localism* would re-commit communities to practices that knit people, land, and labor together within cooperatively-discerned, local limits, enabling each person to know and be known by one another and by God. This Spring, the Center for Catholic Social Thought will further explore this line of thinking in a speaker series entitled, *Land and Labor, City and Homestead: Working towards a Local Economy*. The talks will explore precisely how small farms, urban homesteads, crafts, gardens, chickens, and local economies help us build stronger communities and be better Christians. This four-week series will take place Thursdays, Feb 20–March 13, at 6:30pm, at Assumption Church in St. Paul. Speakers include author and scholar Dale Ahlquist, Professor Christopher Thompson of Saint Paul Seminary, and Tim Streiff of Catholic Rural Life. Register at catholicsocialthought.org.

Tyler Hambley is the Managing Editor of the Catholic Citizen.

INCARNATION, ICONS, AND SCREENS, PART II

Colin Miller

In the last issue we saw something of the Church's teaching about icons (holy paintings, statues, crucifixes, etc.) and the senses. In particular, I laid out how St. John of Damascus taught that, because of the Incarnation, our physical senses could be "sanctified"—made holy. Our sight, more specifically, is not a neutral tool that we can use like a microscope or a pair of binoculars. It is, just like our soul, something that can be holy, or something that can be corrupted. Here I want to reflect a little more on the implications of this teaching for our visual culture.

One place to enter the discussion is to ask, "What is our sight *for*?" The answer, which might seem strange at first, is: To see the Lord. Now, seeing the Lord is, to be sure, a matter of internal, non-physical sight. But the point is that our *bodily* sight is made to be an *aid* to this inward sight. John of Damascus connects the ability we have to see in a holy way with our bodily eyes—as when we look at icons—with our ability to see the Lord in those icons with the eyes of our heart.

And seeing the Lord is what humans are made for: it's what our tradition calls "contemplation." This does not necessarily just refer to "contemplation" in the mode of formal contemplative *prayer*, or of something that monks and nuns do all the time. It can also refer to contemplating God in study, in our neighbor, or in the face of the poor. Contemplation is an active attentiveness to the presence of Christ at the core of any activity (with the recognition that there are particular activities in which he has told us he is easiest to see). All Christian devotion—indeed, all of life—should make us better at this contemplation, this attentiveness, this *internal seeing*.

This includes, as John of Damascus says, what we do with our *bodily* eyes. For it is the uniquely Christian claim that God

has become visible not only to the eyes of our hearts but also to the eyes of our body. This is why we use icons of all types in Christian spaces, and especially in places of worship.

One of the central characteristics of contemplation is peace, rest, or quiet. St. Augustine famously prayed that "our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." When we gaze on an icon, then, we are training our bodily eyes—habituating them—to be calm, attentive, and peaceful. Looking at icons is, in a way, what our bodily eyes were made for. And so, as we get better at this discipline over time, our very way of seeing changes. Again, our bodies are not like machines; they are part of our moral fabric.

And here is the key thing. All this assumes that our bodily eyes, as John of Damascus suggests, are mysteriously connected with our internal eyes—the eyes of our heart—by which we "see" the Lord. The two are so closely connected that, as we train the outer, we train the inner. We train our souls by training our bodies. Or rather, our bodies were never separate from our souls in the first place. Training our bodily eyes with the physical "exercise" of gazing on an icon is one way to cultivate that rest and peace in the Lord that St. Augustine was talking about.

But there is also a shadow side to this. For if we have learned from St. John of Damascus that our sight is moral, that it is part of our soul, and that it has deep spiritual consequences, we are now able to see our "visual culture" in a new light. What kind of "seeing" does it train us in? Is it the slow loving gaze of resting in the Lord, or is it...something else? What kind of eyes does it give us?

We will want to be nuanced about this in detail, but the outlines are clear enough. It seems to me that much of the time our

various digital and screen-based devices might justly be called *anti-icons*. That is, they do the opposite of what an icon is meant to do: they distract, stimulate, and provoke. They train us to crave novelty—the next new thing: a buzz, a beep, a "like." Far from making us peaceful, they encourage our curiosity, and tempt us to seek knowledge simply for the sake of knowledge; or worse: to possess or control or consume. They make us constantly dissatisfied with our image of ourselves, and falsely promise that we can find rest, security or friendship if we just curate our online image a little more.

You don't have to look very far in the expansive literature emerging on the psychological effects of our visual world to see that, whatever else it is doing, it is producing vast amounts of anxiety and depression. It seems right to me, at any rate, that the sorts of souls continual attention to screens produce are in many ways at odds with the habits necessary for Christian contemplation. And because our tradition has always said that con-

templation is where we find our truest joy and happiness, it makes sense that the opposite of contemplation tends to lead us to misery and dis-ease.

And so to our visual culture the Church poses an alternative: what in moral theology used to be called *custodia oculorum*—"the care of your eyes." This probably means, on the one hand, less screen time in general—not just being aware of *what* we look at but *how much* we are looking at screens of any kind. But the Church also gives us something positive to do: go to any church and spend a few minutes prayerfully and lovingly gazing at an icon or the crucifix. I haven't heard of doctors prescribing this as a treatment for anxiety, but it might not be a bad place to start.+

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Spring 2025 Speaker Series

*Land and Labor, City and Homestead:
Working Towards a Local Economy*

Thursdays, Feb 20-March 13, 6:30pm, Assumption Church, St. Paul

Feb 20 – *What is a Local Economy and Why Does It Matter?*

- Colin Miller, Director of the Center for Catholic Social Thought

Feb 27 – *Reflections on the Preferential Option for Localism*

- Professor Christopher Thompson, Dean of Saint Paul Seminary and author of *The Joyful Mystery: Field Notes Towards a Green Thomism*

March 6 – *Catholic Land Movements*

- Tim Strieff, Catholic Rural Life

March 13 – *Localism and Catholic Social Teaching*

- Dale Ahlquist, Speaker and author/editor of many books, including, *Localism: Coming Home to Catholic Social Teaching*

SEEK THE WELFARE OF THE CITY, PART II

Carter Edwards

In the last edition, I introduced the words of the prophet Jeremiah to Israel—to seek the welfare of its oppressor, Babylon, rather than to look for a swift rebellion and overthrow of it—as words that speak even more profoundly to the Christian situation in the world today (Jeremiah 29:1-9). In that piece, I suggested the world in which the Church finds itself is the modern Babylon, as confirmed in the book of Revelation, and Jeremiah shows us the pattern which Christ himself gives as to how to be in the world, to love it, and yet to never be "of" it. In particular, I pointed out that for Jeremiah, to accept with faith our exile while staying faithful to the Lord is to accept an inevitable suffering under the worldly powers. Today, I want to continue these reflections.

That living in exile for the good of Babylon requires *suffering* is the reason the call of the false prophets to refuse to serve Babylon and to look for a swift restoration was so attractive to the Israelites (Jeremiah 27:8-22). For many, this refusal of exile went so far as to desire an allegiance to Egypt, another idolatrous power. The false prophets refused the humiliation of imposed exile, and thus its penitential nature. On the contrary, God tells Jeremiah that he is using Babylon as his own tool, to purify and redeem Israel. This ought to be utterly recognizable to us Christians, following a Christ who submitted to the powers of the world he came to save. As his followers, we recognize that the suffering of a faithful life in the world is to do penance for our own sins as well as to imitate the redemptive way of Christ, awaiting the consummation of his reign at the end of time.

So it is that in this meantime we find ourselves in a place that is not our home. Like the Israelites, we know far too well that we live in a country that is plagued

with any number of sufferings and evils. Like the Israelites, we are here because of our own sins, and yet, at the same time—as redeemed subjects of the true King—a sign of God's mercy and work continuing in the darkness. In such a light, the exhortation of Jeremiah to seek the welfare of the world in which the Lord has placed us begins to make sense. But we also see how thoughtful and nuanced such a position is.

To seek the welfare of the place that inflicts suffering, rather than to expect to

suffer the wrath of a despot who fears the allegiances to a King more powerful than he. Remember, Jeremiah reminds us, that partaking of Babylon's temporal welfare is only for the sake of the world's full submission to Christ. It is good in as much as it leads you and others not to find your welfare in Babylon, but to prove and point her to your hope in the Lord alone. To seek the welfare, rather than to seek a revolution by worldly military alliances, will mean setting up our homes and

communities, albeit temporary ones, in her land. But it must not mean, Jeremiah warns, wavering for one second in our allegiance to another King and Kingdom. Babylon will always ask you to give up your allegiance to the Lord, in the name of a false peace, of promises of her "security." And you must always tell her, by the difference of your words and acts, that her welfare is only temporary. Babylon is the ruler of this world, for a time, but our lot is not with her.

Seek the welfare of the city as your own, for now, but do not acquiesce to her sin, for your total dedication to an alternative way of life is precisely the welfare she needs. Know your life is with hers for a time, but let your life be a prophecy, a sign of hope and humility that will point to her one hope as well.+

Carter Edwards is a mother and homeschooler.

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overthrow her, is at one and the same time an act of humility and an act of hope. Humility on one hand as penance for our sins, past and present, that contribute to the suffering we endure. Hope on the other as we know that our faithfulness to the true King in a strange land will be the cause of suffering, yes, but one that participates in the exact means the Lord uses to bring about the revolution of his Love.

Do not confuse the welfare of the city, Jeremiah says, with an escape from oppression, for it is precisely under Babylon that we expect to be purified. To seek her welfare while living *in her* is to *expect* to

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