

THE CHRONIC VIGOR OF THE CATHOLIC TRADITION: An Interview with Stratford Caldecott

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NEIL TURNBULL [NT]: Many of our readers will know you as the editor of the journal *Second Spring*—a journal that has dedicated itself to finding a way towards a further “resurgence” of Catholic culture in the wider context of a modernity that seems to be hostile to it. Perhaps you could say a little about what you mean by “Catholic culture” and the obstacles that you believe lie in the way of its development in Europe and beyond?

STRATFORD CALDECOTT [SC]: I'm not sure about “many”, but for those who do read the journal or the web-site I hope what comes across is a sense that there is a life, a “chronic vigor” (Newman’s phrase), in the Catholic tradition which is always capable of giving birth to new beauty, new holiness, new civilizations—even now, after two millennia, in a world that thinks it has seen the best Christianity has to offer. I want the journal and our associated books, conferences, and summer schools to encourage a sense of hope and creativity. History isn’t over yet, by a long chalk.

I tend to use the word “culture” rather than “civilization” because of its connection with “cult” (in the sense of religious belief) and ‘cultivation’ (which is what we have to do to keep it alive). A Catholic culture is not the same thing as a civilization. A “culture” can be quite small-scale. It can be carried by a single person or household. It is the way people behave and live, the kinds of things they believe and do. In the West we live in the ruins of a Christian civilization which was originally Catholic, but you couldn’t call it a Catholic *culture*. Catholics are a subculture. The culture that surrounds us is secular, if not anti-Catholic. And that is the main obstacle to what Catholics call evangelization, because it means that any talk of Christian, or Catholic, or even religious revival is greeted by indifference, if not disgust.

NT: The first question also touches on another –the question of the nature of life and its wider cultural value. What role does the idea of life play in Catholic cultures in your view? Is it absolutely central or do other ideas—such as justice and so on - have equality with it? Might some Catholics focus on this issue to the detriment of others?

SC: Well, the right to life is basic to our conception of justice. There is a lot of talk of the sanctity of human life from womb to tomb. It becomes a battleground when people set it against the right to choose. But these are just slogans. Scratch them off and you get to a deeper division, over what we believe is real, and what we are here for. Rights, if they are anything, are responsibilities towards other people imposed by their very nature as “good”—as worthy of existence and deserving to flourish. But philosophers have long since made it impossible to understand how the existence of something or someone can be intrinsically worthy of affirmation—as God affirms things to be “good” in the Book of Genesis. In fact, thanks to

nominalism, not just the goodness but the very existence of things is called into question. The world is a flux on to which we impose convenient labels. And without an ontological foundation, rights can only be based on subjective will and desire.

NT: Many today believe that we live in a largely “post-Christian society.” And yet in the US in particular—still the world’s leading economic and military power—many claim that Christianity retains a significant, perhaps even hegemonic, cultural position. How would you respond to such claims?

SC: Of course Christianity continues to have an important position. It is still the world’s biggest religious tradition, and the Church is the biggest and longest-lasting institution. In America churchgoing is still the norm. But Christianity means many different things. Mostly –if I may be slightly provocative—it is Catholicism with something vital missing. American culture is shaped by Calvin and Hobbes; that is, by voluntarism. It is the home of individualism. For all its piety, it doesn’t have any resistance to consumerism, which becomes all-corrosive. David Schindler is correct when he says, following Will Herberg, that American religiosity tends to be just the flip side of secularism because it has accepted a false notion of freedom. Freedom is defined simply as the power to choose between lots of options, whereas a fuller sense of freedom includes the power to choose the good, the right thing. Quality, not just quantity. The same false notion is, of course, prevalent in Europe and the UK, although here secularism takes slightly different forms for historical reasons (the establishment of a State Church, for example, in England). But in the end nothing can save Christianity if this false sense of freedom prevails.

NT: Many claim that in response to the crises of modernity the Church needs to embark on new projects of evangelization. And yet in the context of modernity the very attempt to evangelize can appear eccentric (at best). How do you think that the Christian truth can and should be communicated today?

SC: There will always be a role for apologetics— explaining what we believe and why, demolishing the arguments against faith, clearing the ground, so to speak. And of course Christians will employ all the available media to do so. It is perhaps even more important to prepare the ground in another way—not the intellect, but the imagination. People live much more in the imagination than they do in the intellect, and the fact is that our modern technological civilization makes it very difficult to imagine how Christianity might be true— or why it might be attractive. That is why fiction, poetry, film, the arts in general are terribly important. The most successful and exciting things I have been involved with are the things that engaged the imagination— pilgrimages, plays, and so on (all of them, I should add, my wife’s initiatives not mine). But making a ‘project’ of evangelization as such can be a distraction from the most important thing, which is simply to *get on with it*. I say this having spent years fiddling around on the margins of the Academy trying to come up with the perfect project, and then to get it funded. If we live our faith, and stick at it, not for the sake of winning converts but just because it is true, good, and beautiful in its own right, others will see that the faith makes sense and it becomes attractive to them. If we love God and our neighbor, if we struggle to become holy, if we try to identify our sins and repent of them, if we pray every day, if we draw on the grace of the sacraments, then we are doing what we should. It sounds pious but there is no other way.

NT: Clearly the scientific conception of the world remains a significant obstacle to any realistic Christian project of evangelization—and given its deep cultural embedding, Darwinism remains the obstacle above all. What is your view on how Catholicism should respond to the philosophical hegemony of modern science?

SC: What we face today is a culture that thinks it has found a viable alternative to religious tradition and belief. Instead of truth, we are offered technology, which appears to make possible unlimited economic growth, and perhaps eventually an escape from mortality. Not only is that a mirage, but as a number of authors have pointed out, modern science is the fruit of faith in an ordered, created cosmos, and many of the great scientists of the past were Christians of one sort or another. (Which is not to say that India and the Arabs were not important as well.) Certainly there is no conflict between faith and science rightly understood, only between fideism and scientism, which is very different. It is true that science tends to focus on what things are made of and how they work, and if someone believes that nothing else can be important or true then there is no place for religion. But those types of questions are never going to be enough for human beings, as we see when scientists come to the edge of their field and find themselves up to their necks in spiritual and metaphysical questions—often beginning with the word “why” (like why does mathematics work in the real world, why does anything exist at all, and why is it all so beautiful?). Darwinism in the sense of a theory about how life evolved is not a problem. Catholics can engage with that on a rational level. But when it becomes either dogma or philosophy—false religion or false rationality—we need to watch out. Social Darwinism feeds into transhumanism, eugenics, the commercialization and commodification of life, until we are left in an hermetically sealed, apparently entirely man-made universe, a kind of CGI dystopia. In fact, why bother with the messiness of biology at all, if you can download your

consciousness into an electronic matrix and live in the “cloud”? It is the delusion of the Gnostics in modern guise. I don’t think the Church has a problem with science as such, but she hasn’t quite woken up to many of the challenges from a rapidly evolving technology. As well as the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, the Vatican needs a group of futurologists and science fiction writers to advise it, an Academy of Fantasists.

NT: I am also interested in your views on metaphysics. I think that you have written before about the destruction of metaphysics in the 20th century and its wider cultural effects. How and in what ways is metaphysics important for a Catholic thinker at the beginning of the 21st century?

SC: Metaphysicians care about what is real, and in what *way* it is real. Most people think reality is what we make it, or live entirely in their imaginations, or think that even if there *is* an objective reality out there, we can change it as we wish. It was reading René Guénon years ago, before I was a Catholic, that woke me up to the importance of metaphysics, as he did many people. But Guénon was a Catholic convert to Islamic Sufism influenced by Advaita Vedanta, and though that kind of metaphysics helps you to interpret religious symbolism in very interesting ways, and opens up important avenues for dialogue across and between traditions, it misses the very essence of Christianity, as Jean Borella has shown. So this kind of metaphysics is a wake-up call, a challenge, but not the end of the road. Nevertheless, Guénon identified our modern problem as the “reign of quantity” and the decline of metaphysics, and he was right about that. I latched on to Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar because they seemed to see even more clearly and deeply into the modern crisis. They saw it as rooted in nominalism and voluntarism and the separation of nature and grace. I became interested in Radical

Orthodoxy for similar reasons. According to Balthasar, what we see unfolding is the “battle of the Logos” provoked by the Incarnation, and Christians are called to be defenders of metaphysics. Pope John Paul II in his encyclical about philosophy *Fides et Ratio* called on Catholics to develop once more a philosophy of “genuinely metaphysical range”. I think we are called to a revival of metaphysics, but the point is that it can’t be kept separate from theology. The two disciplines illuminate each other.

NT: I would like to finish with a political question—and ask you how your views articulate themselves politically. Would you view yourself as a “progressive” or a “conservative” thinker?

SC: That gives me a chance to produce one of my favorite Chesterton quotes. “The whole modern world has divided itself into Conservatives and Progressives. The business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of Conservatives is to prevent mistakes from being corrected.” I am neither, I hope. The only label I sometimes accept is “Distributist”, but even that has to be explained to avoid misunderstanding. I don’t care for our current politics at all, although I am sympathetic to the new “red Tory/ blue Labour” axis. Maybe that, combined with the shock of the global economic crisis and perhaps the collapse of the Euro, will destroy the status quo and lead to a genuinely new political paradigm—eventually. But I don’t put my hopes in politics of any sort (even Church politics). Distributism has been influential, but it didn’t work— and most successful mutualist movements didn’t work for long—because what is always needed is the presence of a certain spirit, a moral and spiritual movement, to hold people together in service of the common good, to enable them to transcend their differences. When that spirit goes, a clever manifesto or a set of procedures and principles is not

enough. This is I think what Pope Benedict is getting at in *Caritas in Veritate*—unfortunately not his most lucid encyclical, but full of powerful hints and suggestions. I am not politically involved, but I would like to see some of those seeds begin to grow.