INTRODUCTION

A review of Maritain’s philosophy of culture in the context of the “culture war” which broke out in the United States and Western Europe in 1968 can instruct us about the nature of our distress and the steps that must be taken toward recovery.

Over the past thirty years (in the aftermath of that revolution), my students and I have reflected on the symptoms of cultural decline in the United States, aided by scholars in several disciplines who have addressed related facets of the problem. The accumulated experience and files may be useful one day in preparing an intellectual history of our country during this crucial period, from which we have not yet emerged.

Precisely a decade ago (Oct. 15, 1990), Nicholas Lobkowicz said in a paper he presented at Notre Dame: “Almost everything that has gone wrong in the recent history of our culture originated in the minds of people such as ourselves, people who are university graduates and intellectuals.” He challenged us to use the very same intellectual resources to promote a re-evangelization of our culture much as Maritain did a generation earlier: “In a
word, to create a Christian impact upon our culture today simply means to do almost everything that helps man to be more human, all the while knowing that the Catholic faith has much more to say about this subject than non-Christians care to hear.” This same challenge was issued by the Second Vatican Council and continues to be heard in the papal magisterium. “It seems to me,” Lobkowicz said, “that Pope John Paul II constantly exemplifies the only realistic answer” to the question, what is the Christian’s task today? “through his statements and behavior.”

In 1934 Maritain wrote that “Every truth which is freshly propounded requires a certain time for decantation so as to appear in its true character...” This could apply, perhaps, to his own thought. He anticipated, I think, our cultural revolution’s fundamental causes when he wrote in 1960: “A time will come when people will give up in practical existence those values about which they no longer have any intellectual conviction.” He also saw the solution: “In my mind the notion of the present trials endured by civilization was inseparable from that of a new humanism, which is in preparation in the present death struggle of the world, and which at the same time is preparing the renewal of civilization...,” as he put it at the time of World War II.

These concerns, which ran through the life of Maritain after 1930, illustrate his way of exercising “applied philosophy,” which he saw as an obligation of witness. In 1966, as his career was drawing to a close, the “Peasant of the Garonne” insisted that he was only repeating what he had been saying “for thirty or forty years.” It is a sketch of “what I have found to be true.” In temporal affairs Maritain was, in his own words, “a philosopher who remains simply a philosopher and acts only as a philosopher,” by upholding “the very values which philosophy has to defend and maintain.” This is what he called “applied philosophy.”

Donald Gallagher, a past president of this association and Maritain biographer, referred to him as “an outstanding and original philosopher of culture” who had a “habit of setting topics [and] questions in their cultural context.” He added that Maritain’s philosophy of culture (an integral part of
his “prophetic philosophy”) was intended for a large audience of educated persons whom he wished to mobilize for the vital task of restoring to contemporary culture its human and Christian bearings. To this “program” of restoration, he fearlessly “dedicated his life” all the while expecting its realization to require many generations. 

Gallagher’s summary of Maritain’s philosophy of culture selects eight of his works for special attention, and it is to these that I have turned in preparing this presentation. In what follows, I shall be using Maritain’s own words to set up the problem and work through it.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL NOTION OF CULTURE;
ITS RELATION TO HUMANISM

Joseph Evans, Maritain’s devoted editor, found evidence in an early diary entry that he began to reflect more earnestly on moral and political philosophy in 1926 (at the age of 44), when he discerned the outlines of an “authentically Christian politics” and began his effort “to establish, in light of a philosophy of history and of culture,...the nature of the new humanism for which we are waiting.”

In those early years, Maritain used this definition of culture, which he usually treated as equivalent with civilization: “…by culture or civilization is meant the common good, terrestrial or temporal, of the human being.... Culture is the unfolding of life properly human, comprising not only the material development necessary and sufficient to permit us to lead a right life here [i.e., the material common good], but also, and above all, the moral development, the development of speculative activities and of practical activities (artistic and ethical) which deserve to be properly called human development [i.e., the spiritual common good].” Thus “...the philosophy of culture and of society” belongs to what Aristotle and St. Thomas called practical science, which is the realm of human action. Above all, it is a
“science of freedom.” So far as I can determine, this (1936) may be his first use of the expression, “the philosophy of culture.”

Moreover, Maritain always treated culture in the context of humanism, for it “tends essentially to render man more truly human and to manifest his original greatness by enabling him to partake of everything in nature and in history capable of enriching him.”

“What determines the unity of a culture is first and above all a common philosophical structure, a certain metaphysical and moral attitude, a common scale of values—in short, a common idea of the universe, of man and of life, of which the social, linguistic, and juridical structures are, so to speak, the embodiment.” Since it pertains to the temporal sphere, the object of culture is “the terrestrial and perishable good of our life on this earth” and is therefore subordinate to eternal life, our ultimate end. A civilization where this subordination is respected is necessarily superior to one in which it is not. Still, “...all the civilizations and cultures on earth..., whatever erroneous forms they may involve, endure only in virtue of the good which they contain....” In “the common Providence of God” grace maintains all of them “in their particular types, correcting and super-elevating each.”

In sum, “culture or civilization is the expansion of the peculiarly human life, including not only whatever material development may be necessary and sufficient to enable us to lead an upright life on this earth, but also and above all the moral development, the development of the speculative and practical activities (artistic and ethical) peculiarly worthy of being called a human development.” This does not happen automatically, Maritain cautioned; we are just as free to corrupt our nature as we are to develop it.

RELIGION IN CULTURE

As we have seen, humanism is concerned (besides terrestrial matters) with “…all that is ordained to the supra-human,...all considerations of transcendence.” Indeed religion plays “a principal part” in cultural
development. In the abstract, culture requires only natural religion, but since a pure state of nature has never existed, “from the earliest times God willed to bring to the knowledge of men things far in excess” of the requirements of nature. He makes grace available to divinize our knowing and our loving: “God makes such divine advances to all men at all times,” which they are free to accept or reject. All cultures, then, “retain some vestige of the primordial revelations,” even if most of them have “declined from the supernatural order” and deviated, as a consequence, from the natural order as well. “True religion...is not of man or of the world or a civilization or a culture...; it is of God. It transcends every civilization and every culture. It is the supreme beneficent and animating principle of all civilizations and cultures, while in itself independent of them all, free, universal, strictly universal, catholic.” 16

By the time he presented his lectures on “Integral Humanism” (1934), Maritain was proposing “a ‘new style’ for the relationship between religion and culture, between the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘temporal.’...” This “new style” had everything to do with the inspiration he found in the teachings and spirit of St. Thomas Aquinas. 17

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS ON CULTURE

Thomas had a genius, Maritain wrote, for discerning “the most powerful energies of life, of renewal, of revolution,” and what was worth saving in pagan thought and the “discordant clamors” of philosophers. Therefore, we need to have him “teach us Christian philosophy in the social and cultural order” under our “new historical sky” and others skies still in the future, because St. Thomas is always a “contemporary author.” 18 Between the wisdom of Thomism “and the particular forms of culture, incessant vital exchanges ought to prevail,” but in its essence, Thomism is “rigorously independent of these particular forms.” “It is from this wisdom that we must draw...the intellectual values which every country in the world needs.... It alone can revive the West, give it back again the free and living use of its spiritual riches, its tradition and
its culture; it alone can save also the heritage of the East, and reconcile the two halves of the world.” 19

Culture can never do without the *philosophia perennis*—“the Greek Aristotle transfigured by the Angelic Doctor.... It is precisely this heritage that the world needs.... We must mobilize it. And to mobilize it is not an easy matter, for the solution to all the new problems which are thus raised is not to be found ready made in Saint Thomas: to bring out this solution a new and original effort is required....” As every philosophy must be “corrected” and even “transformed” if it is to address real situations, so Thomism must leave the controversies of the schools and “go out into the highways and byways,” to “spread its wings.... Thomist philosophy is of its very nature a progressive and assimilative philosophy, a missionary philosophy....” Thomas “is in all the fullness of the term the apostle of modern times.” He “wrote not for the thirteenth century but for our time. His own time is the time of the spirit, which dominates the ages.” He is “the most ‘present’ of all thinkers.” 20

Robert Brennan found St. Thomas to be one of the great philosophers of culture in the active or dynamic sense of the term, which embraces all of its material, intellectual, and moral aspects, in a progressive movement of growth or decline that “cuts through the life of a people, laying bare the very core of their being and genius.” Lapses can and do occur because of the effects of original sin. Although our current understanding of “culture” was unknown in the thirteenth century, Brennan cites many passages where St. Thomas spoke of “the perfection of man’s nature in its specifically human and social aspects.” According to Brennan, what makes St. Thomas’ philosophy of culture so valuable for us today is his emphasis on the transcendent context of its essential principles, contrary to the contemporary anti-humanistic, fatalistic, and materialistic ideologies which are unable to see any hope beyond the present order of existence. 21
THE PLIGHT OF MODERN CULTURE  (DESCARTES’ DREAM):
CRITIQUE OF ANTHROPOCENTRIC HUMANISM

In 1931 Maritain remarked that the chief cause of the ills of modern culture was the “spirit” of “my dear enemy.” 22 But even before Descartes, the men of the Renaissance had already begun the modern derailment by championing “a fundamental spiritual deviation..., an erroneous spiritual principle” which must be “uncovered” in order to recognize the bitter fruits of that historical period (which also, to be sure, made significant contributions to human culture). 23 By the time of Descartes, “…metaphysical unity [had] long been broken—not completely destroyed, certainly, but broken” and by now it has been virtually effaced, at least in the West. “What constitutes the drama of Western culture is the reduction of its common metaphysical basis to an absolutely insufficient minimum, so that it holds together now primarily through matter, and matter is incapable of keeping anything together. This drama is all the more serious for us because everything at the moment has to be done over again.” 24

Writing on this subject between 1931 and 1939, Maritain developed what he called “three moments” during which culture became progressively more detached from the sacred, and then turned against the human. A new “anthropocentric humanism” wanted to make terrestrial goods self-sufficient, and it understood material progress as the exploitation of nature by scientific and industrial technique. A myth of “absolute sovereignty” attributed to humanity was to be found at the heart of this modern culture. But now “morality does not liberate man; [it only] makes him slave to all the atoms of the universe, and above all, to his own misery and egoism.” Man is reduced to the status of “a consumer crowned with science.” 25

The three “moments” in “The dialectic of modern culture,” or “Anthropological Humanism” are:

1) Classical (15th and 16th centuries)—Rationalist humanism, or Christian naturalism, reverses the order of ends: “culture seeks its supreme
end in itself” and asserts “the domination of man over matter,” with God as the guarantor.

2) Bourgeois (17th and 18th centuries)—“Culture puts before all else the aim to be lord of exterior nature and to reign over it by means of technological procedure.” A technological or artificial process” aspires to create “a world adapted to the felicity of our material life.” But since God is not just “an idea,…a culture which separates itself from supreme supernatural standards is bound to take sides against them.”

3) Revolutionary (19th and 20th centuries)—“God dies; materialized man thinks he can be man or superman only if God is not God.” This atheistic, materialistic overthrow of values and promotion of a new man causes the conditions of life to become more and more inhuman: Man subordinates himself to nature. “The primacy of technique” aims at artificial remedies to relieve the bad effects of artificial causes external to man. A “progressive driving back of the human by matter” results in the loss of authentic humanity; “the forces which man has unloosed are tearing him to pieces.”

The elements of our contemporary “culture of death” proceed from the principle “that man alone, and by himself alone, works out his salvation.” In fact it is a principle of anti-humanist irrationalism: “After having put aside God in order to become self-sufficient, man loses his soul; he seeks himself in vain, turning the universe upside down in his effort to find himself again. He finds only masks, and, behind those masks, death.”

THE NOTION OF CHRISTIAN CULTURE (MARITAIN’S DREAM):
ADVOCACY OF THEOCENTRIC HUMANISM

If I call the great theme of his social and political philosophy, “the dream of Maritain,” this is not to imply that it is as impossible of fulfillment as the “dream of Descartes.” The best indication of Maritain’s realism in respect to Christian Humanism is his early admission that the philosophy of culture is burdened today by the inertia “which clings to what is dead and done with in
the temporal ideal of mediaeval Christendom” and, on the other side, by the recklessness of those who want to do away with “the very idea of Christendom.” Now, as in the Middle Ages, “the truth must be sought as a summit between these two opposing errors.” Without entertaining exaggerated expectations, we must orient ourselves by the coming inauguration of “authentic Christendom.”

Already in 1931, Maritain was raising the question of possible incompatibility between “the Christian conception of culture” (the humanism of the Incarnation), and “the contemporary world.” Certainly “the Christian idea is opposed to the modern world...to the extent that the modern world is inhuman. But to the extent that the modern world ...involves a real growth of history, [it] is not opposed to...the Christian conception of culture.... Rather the reverse: it would endeavor to preserve in the modern world and bring back to the order of the spirit all the riches of life the modern world contains.” The Christian conception is still alive and retains its capacity to dominate culture.

Maritain developed this thought in the early ‘30s: Originally Christianity placed the different “wisdoms” of the ancient world (Indian, Hebrew, Greek) into a hierarchy, worked out their synthesis, and eventually (in the Middle Ages) produced an “order of wisdom” which begins with the metaphysical and theological (the “wisdom of reason” and the “wisdom of faith”) and extends to the “visible” social, political, and economic orders (although movements of descent can occur even in the Christian order, as God and man reach for each other).

For Maritain, this explains why “Saint Thomas Aquinas is our predestined guide in the reconstruction of Christian culture.... [His] is the most highly developed and the most perfect form of Christian thought; it is the lofty wisdom placed under the sign of the Common Doctor of the Church that provides Christian culture with this indispensable instrument.” His achievement makes Western Christian culture “precious among all others.”
because it “is basically universal…. It is precisely this heritage that the world needs.” 31

By 1936 Maritain was calling Christian culture “theocentric, or integral humanism” to distinguish it from the anthropocentric humanism of modernity. With undisguised enthusiasm, he began to promulgate a “new age of Christendom” which will give “evangelical attention to the human,” to “the secular and temporal activity of the human being.” This new age will see a “transfiguration” of “the social life of humanity,…a veritable socio-temporal realization of the Gospel,” wherein “the human person” works “to transform conditions which oppress him...”. 32

The closing sentence of the lectures on “Science and Wisdom,” where Maritain seeks to “open out the springs of a new Christian epoch in a worn-out world” bear, I think, the traces of Raissa’s talent: In “...a Christian civilization...we picture to ourselves an integrally humanist civilization in which the great waves of wisdom in man, sweeping from the sacred heights of faith to the extreme coast of the human and the profane, will set free all that is true in the human and the profane.” 33

THE TASK FOR APPLIED CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY:
The Transformation of Culture

If Christian humanism is still alive and preserves its capacity to exercise an influence on the world, “We must therefore work with our whole hearts to bring such a realization about...”. Maritain quickly realized what this meant: Only “love and sanctity” can “transfigure the condition of mankind”: “The foregoing observations make it clearly apparent what a prime, fundamental necessity it is to the life of the world that Catholicism penetrate to the very depths of, and vivify, culture, and that Catholics form sound cultural, philosophical, historical, social, political, economic and artistic conceptions, and endeavor to transmit them into the reality of history.” 34
Such a development is by no means assured, but Maritain was the perennial optimist: “I do not think that [the modern] process of disintegration is bound to be fatal....” If Christians are to prevail, however, “It is terribly urgent that we recover the conditions of a truly human culture which assimilates the things of man to the things of the spirit, and by that makes possible true liberty.” “The situation is not a desperate one,” provided that it inspire “heroic renewal and rectification.” 35 The means are always the same, for the “vocation” is imposed upon every Christian at Baptism “by the supreme laws of the redeeming Incarnation.” But “Our principles, alas! are asleep and error is ever on the watch, active and enterprising.... The terrifying lack of attention” to Pope Leo’s social encyclicals was, for Maritain, “one of the most distressing phenomena of modern history.” 36

This goal “can be realized only if saints (men and women striving for holiness at every moment) set their hand to it,” helped by “the cross in the heart” (redemptive suffering). “The great struggle of our age,” in short, is between self-indulgence and self-denial. While “society needs philosophers in this connection [in discovering “the true and genuine ends of human life”], it needs saints even more.” 37

These passages make it clear that when Maritain speaks of a task “to transform the world” he means its spiritual transformation—not a temporal effort to improve the world itself (he called that “idealistic nonsense”). The task of Christian philosophy is to achieve a correct understanding of “transformation” and then to pursue it consciously. “Modern civilization...requires a total and, I may say, substantial recasting, a transvaluation of cultural principles...”. It is in this sense that we are called to nothing short of “a profound transformation of the temporal order.” This is on the agenda, not for today but “for tomorrow or the next day,” he added in the dark early years of World War II. 38 The opponent is formidable and will not easily yield: “As I said in True Humanism..., the world is the domain at once of man, of God, and of the devil. Thus appears the essential ambiguity of the world and of its history.... [It] belongs to God by right of creation; to the devil by
right of conquest...; to Christ by right of victory over the conqueror.... The task of the Christian in the world is to contend with the devil his domain, to wrest it from him;...he will succeed in it only in part as long as time will endure”  

HOW THIS TASK IS TO BE CARRIED OUT

“The need for this mission appears much clearer today than formerly,” Maritain wrote in 1966. What he was able to see more clearly in light of Vatican II was “the temporal mission of the Christian,...to transform the world,...to cooperate with the evolution of the world in such a way that...the spirit of Christ and of his kingdom would in some fashion vivify worldly things themselves.” This is “the proper task...of Christians who live in the world,” aided by the doctrine and counsel of the Church, but without confusing her with any particular culture. Moreover, “it is always only a question of helping the world to resolve its problems, not resolving them for it.” But “Woe to the world if the Christian were to isolate and separate his temporal mission...from his spiritual vocation!....This temporal mission requires him to enter as deeply as possible into the agonies, the conflicts, and the earthly problems, social or political, of his age...”.  

“I see one truth clearly: what matters in a very special way, and perhaps more than anything else, for our age, is the life of prayer and of union with God lived in the world...., in the common condition of lay people with all its turmoil, its risks and its temporal burdens.” The activist temptation “to organize all laymen of good will in the fascinating efficacy of collective action, as far as possible technically organized” must be resisted. Moreover, “those who fight for such a purpose know that they will always be resisted, will win only contested successes, and that they will often fail. But what they do they will do well, if they do it truly as Christians.... What is demanded of the Christian is to intervene in the destiny of the world,...but remaining...a subordinate agent: servant of divine Providence....” He “is not entitled to ask for—nor to propose as
the end of his temporal activity—a definite advent of justice and peace....” For “the progress of temporal history...is not capable of any final form.” 41

CONCLUSION

Maritain’s dream remains a viable program for cultural renewal. We may concur, I believe, with his judgment that with reference to both speculative and practical “philosophy within the faith,” but with special attention to moral and political philosophy, “we may thank God that there will be no shortage of work for philosophers in the future.” 42 He would surely have approved of the order in which “Faith, Scholarship, and Culture” appear in this conference program. “In the evening twilight in which we stand, there are signs...which lead us to think that already the uncertain rays of a dawn are beginning to show themselves.... This war is a struggle to pass from the rays of dawn to daylight,” words spoken with reference to World War II, but just as applicable, I think, to our cultural revolution. 43


2 Jacques Maritain, Science and Wisdom (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940), Lecture I, ix. [Hereafter SW]


4 Maritain, The Twilight of Civilization (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943) viii. [Hereafter TC]


9 Maritain, Some Reflections on Culture and Liberty (Chicago: University Press, 1933) 2. [Hereafter SR]

10 Maritain, IH foreword, x f; 71.

11 Maritain, TC 3.


14 Ibid. 8, 5.

15 Maritain, TC 4.

16 Maritain, RC 9 f, 12 f.

17 Evans, preface, IH vi, xi.

18 Maritain, IH 207-209; SR 1.

19 Maritain, ST 19, 76 (where he cites the earlier Primauté du spirituel, 1927).


23 Maritain, *SR* 3.

24 Maritain, *ST* 69.


26 Maritain, *IH* 30-32; cf. *SR* 7 f. This diagnosis has close parallels with the work of three of Maritain’s contemporaries: Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, and Yves Simon. It is noteworthy that these four philosophers lectured at the University of Chicago under the auspices of the Walgreen Foundation in contiguous years (1949-1952).

27 Maritain, *TC* 6, 10.

28 Maritain, *IH* 208. In this aspiration I find the same realistic ideal that enabled the Fathers of Vatican II to break new ground with their pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world (*Gaudium et Spes*), 1965, especially in a section on “The Proper Development of Culture” (53-62). Maritain reacted enthusiastically to an early schema of this document, which he thought “opens up immense horizons…” (*PG* 67).


30 Maritain, *SW* 18 f., 23.

31 Maritain, *ST* 87, 76, 78 f.

32 Maritain, *IH* 76, 94.

33 Maritain, *SW* 132 f.

34 Maritain, *RC* 27 f.; *TC* 9, 12.

35 Maritain, *SR* 10; *TC* 29.

36 Maritain, *RC* 29. At that moment, Pope Pius XI was doing what he could to remedy the situation in *Quadragessimo Anno* (1931).

37 Maritain, *IH* 73; *SR* 9; *UP* 10.
38 Maritain, *PG* 231 f.; *IH* 207; *TC* 30, 33 f.


41 *Ibid.* 228 f., 234 and 236 (in a “Digression on the Temporal Mission of the Christian”). Evidently the Vatican II document, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, on the universal call to holiness and the apostolate of the laity, came too late (1965) for Maritain to have rejoiced in its congruence with his own view. That document elaborates chapter IV (“The Laity”) of the dogmatic constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), 1964, which Maritain must have known when he wrote *The Peasant*. He would also have taken heart from the many places in the magisterium of John Paul II (most notably *Christifideles Laici*, on the lay members of Christ’s faithful, 1988) where this theme is further enriched.

42 Maritain, *SW* 104; cf. 78 n 1.