



The Catholic Citizen

A Publication of the Church of the Assumption, Saint Paul, MN

CHRIST’S MESSAGE

By Peter Maurin 1934

1. “No one can serve two masters, God and Mammon.”

2. “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

3. “If you want to be perfect, sell all you have, give it to the poor, take up your cross and follow Me.”

—New Testament

4. “These are hard words, but the hard words of a book are the only reason why the book was written.”

—Robert Louis Stevenson

IN SUPPORT OF IRRESPONSIBILITY (PART II)

Colin Miller

In the July *Catholic Citizen* I contrasted two different modes of life. The first is dedicated to the maintenance of the body and ultimately to the avoidance of death. This is the mode of *work*. The other is the mode of celebration, leisure, and festivity. It’s the mode of *play*. The work mode is concerned with efficiency, calculation, and results, while the play mode takes no thought for these things, but spends them freely.

I noted that, in many ways, the work mode is the embodiment of the internal life of a factory, and that in our industrial society this ethos has spread to every corner of our culture. We all feel the constant pressure to be more efficient, to produce more, to squeeze a little more out of a little less.

Still, we might imagine that, with the computer and high-tech revolutions of the last 50 years or so, we have left this factory logic behind. Yet, as thinkers like Korean Catholic philosopher Byung-Chul Han have argued, the digital turn represents not liberation from factory slavery, but its totalization. Life online is the spread of the work mode into every moment of our lives, so that we never get to rest.

This is because the digitalization of the economy is all about efficient *production*, just like the factory system is. And this comes to include not just more efficient

production of *things*, but the production of *ourselves*.

What does Han have in mind? That much of the time I spend online I spend in the creation of my image, of my digital identity, which is increasingly becoming simply who I am. I’m the product. The central commodity which I’m selling to everyone out there is *me*. In this way I’m producing myself, and production is, of course, work.

As payment, I earn “likes”, “views”, and “followers,” in the service of building up my “profile” or in becoming an “influencer.” Yet this is not just a metaphor, for this social “currency,” as we know, often translates into real dollars, and it is also increasingly true that *only* this kind of virtual capital is able to secure a paycheck. If you’re working any job with an online component, the status that accrues to looking good online is essential to your earning capacity. And so we produce ourselves.

But producing ourselves has also become essential to having a social life. In an age when friendship is often reduced to social media, there is tremendous pressure to constantly curate, update, and maximize my virtual appeal. So I’m always selling myself in order to have friends. And the thing is, I can do this 24-hours a day. I can always be aware of what I lack, or how I measure up to others. There’s always more

work to be done; the factory of self-production never closes. Now, we don’t just work at home, we live at work. As Han says, we become our *own* slaves.

And here’s the rub: in this totalized work mode Christianity comes to seem absurd. I noted in the July piece the way the early Christians lived *prodigal* lives. Giving up the sword, voluntary poverty, living with the poor, economic sharing, and being part of an illegal “cult,” all made life *precarious*. Today we often struggle to even understand such a life, much less to practice it.

Our analysis helps us see why we feel like this. The factory ethos is not just an atmosphere we can choose to reject by adjusting our “attitude.” Rather, living in a totalized work culture slowly trains us—whether we want it to or not—into people obsessed with control. When the work mode dominates most of our waking hours—in *productive* tasks as innocent as going to the office, saving for retirement or updating social media—the mode of *play* begins to disappear. We come to find those parts of Christianity that are “irrespons-ible” with bodily life not just unpalatable, but unreasonable or even evil.

Continued on the last page...

DISHONORING THE SOLDIER: WHEN WAR-MAKING BECOMES AN IDOL

Fr. Byron Hagan

The *virtue* of nationalism is the reasonable extension of the pious patriotism we ought to have for family, neighbor, and city. It is essential to the operation of that virtue that we honor those who have dedicated their lives in service to our nation, especially paying tribute to those who have given their lives in its defense.

There is also a *vice* of nationalism and the same legitimate patriotism just mentioned can lead to it. Now a Christian ought always to be on guard against idolatry of any kind, but some idolatries are, as William Cavanaugh points out, more “splendid” than others and thus easier to cast as virtues. Positing “national interest” as a moral absolute is precisely the “splendid” idolatry of nationalism, yet few of us would explicitly claim that as our moral position. Still, we can performatively affirm what we categorically deny, and I think this is what we do when we embrace the idealized, glorified, mythic history of our nation’s war-making, or think that “support our troops” entails signing a blank check for military force to the Chief Executive.

There is a glamorous version of our national history in the social imaginary that can make us uncritical with respect to the violence our government perpetrates on our behalf. A government can be all too ready to leverage the patriotism of its citizens for questionable ends or even ends downright undeserving of an honorable citizen’s support. Truthfulness demands we do better than the polarized either/or of mass market politics, where America is either the defender of global freedom or a power-hungry global hegemon. America is both.

The American Civil War, its Christian characterization cemented through Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address* with its lang-

uage of hallowing and consecration of the battleground by the blood of self-sacrificing Union soldiers, is a paradigm case in our national imagination of a “glamorous” war waged for noble, even righteous and holy, reasons. The United States of America waged war *on itself* in order to secure both its physical and spiritual integrity. After the smoke had cleared we came to believe, for a time, that we had been absolved of our great national sin. Yet spiritual scars remain and they cannot be healed by mere physical force.

There can be a similarly “glamorous” version of World War II, that can also reinforce the idea that the United States fights only for just and noble causes. How could America have maintained her moral high ground while abandoning Europe, the home of her parent culture, to a genocidal neopagan Naziism, leaving it opposed only by an atheistic and totalitarian Stalinist Sovietism? The subsequent conflict on the Korean peninsula can be treated under a similar rubric: at least America saved the southern half of the peninsula from the hellish, Stalinist fate of the north, just as we saved China and the Pacific Island chains from domination by the rapacious Empire of Japan.

But when Robert McNamara, the so-called “architect of the Vietnam War,” spoke of the “fog of war,” he wasn’t thinking just about Vietnam but also about the brutal consequentialism of the Allied high command in WWII under which he learned his trade. “I think the human race needs to think more about killing,” said McNamara, “How much evil must we do in order to do good?”

We Americans have proven ourselves willing to kill and die at the bidding of our government. But the commitment to American global dominance, to securing

our continued supervision of the global political-economic order which operates especially to the economic advantage of the United States, has been woven seamlessly into the venerable ideology of America as defender of freedom, in which every conflict is a redux of the issue of WWII, every enemy a sort of reincarnation of Hitler and the Nazis. But this militant, global posture of the United States was bound to create resentment and spark the emergence of powerful rivals who mirror both American ambitions and American methods, inevitably creating further conflict.

The temptation to replace the idea of the Christian Church with the idea of the United States is an old one. When the notion of patriotism is made to extend so far as to demand uncritical faith in the justice of every American military conflict, it would seem that patriotism is being manipulated to serve an end for which it is morally unfitting. The great transgression of humanity is the attempt to achieve heaven by worldly means. In answer to Pilate’s inquiry into the nature of his kingship Jesus says “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then my servants would fight” (Jn 18:36). Pilate, in fact, gives the people a stark choice (Mt 27:15ff): in bringing out Barabbas the political revolutionary—whose name means “son of the Father”—Pilate in effect says to the assembled crowd, “here are two men who lay claim to messiahship. One who attempts a divine kingdom by military violence, the other who claims that God will save you through his witness to the truth. Which messiah will you choose?” We know the answer the crowd gave. The message of this passage is stark: to invest messianic hope in human force is to choose against Christ, who has,

by his death and resurrection, already overcome the world.

The continued war-making of man, of “nation rising against nation,” is simply the playing out of the death cycle of the corrupt regime of this world, a regime under which we suffer but before which we must never simply bow. Our fellow citizens in uniform and our beloved war dead do not demand we betray our Christian identity and mission in order to become idolators in their honor.+

Fr. Byron Hagan is Co-Pastor of St. Mary’s in Lowertown, St. Paul, MN.

MORAL DISARMAMENT

By Peter Maurin 1936

1. Theodore Roosevelt used to say: “If you want peace prepare for war.”
2. So everybody prepared for war but war preparations did not bring peace; they brought war.
3. Since war preparations brought war, why not quit preparing for war.
4. If nations prepared for peace instead of preparing for war, they might have peace.
5. Aristide Briand used to say: “The best kind of disarmament is the disarmament of the heart.”
6. The disarmament of Germany by the Allies was not the product of a change of heart on the part of the Allies toward Germany.

VARIETIES OF LOCALISM: NATIVE AMERICAN POLITY

Samuel Piccolo

One of the best books I’ve read this year is Larry McMurtry’s western epic *Lonesome Dove*, in which Captains Gus McCrae and Woodrow Call lead a handful of men and a few thousand cattle from the Mexican border to Montana. Gus and Call are retired Texas Rangers, earning their ranks in the decades-long war against the Comanche Native peoples that previously dominated the territory. By the late 1870s, Texas has been almost entirely pacified and only a few renegade Natives remain. The Rangers’ purpose has been achieved. Yet the victory leaves Gus unsatisfied. “Does it ever occur to you that everything we done was probably a mistake?” he says to Call as they move north. “Me and you done our work too well. We killed off most of the people that made this country interesting to begin with.” Gus suggests that the Rangers’ work and the sacrifices of the settlers were, in the end, little more than a ploy for the elites to get richer. “Women and children and settlers are just cannon fodder for lawyers and bankers. They’re part of the scheme,” he tells Call.

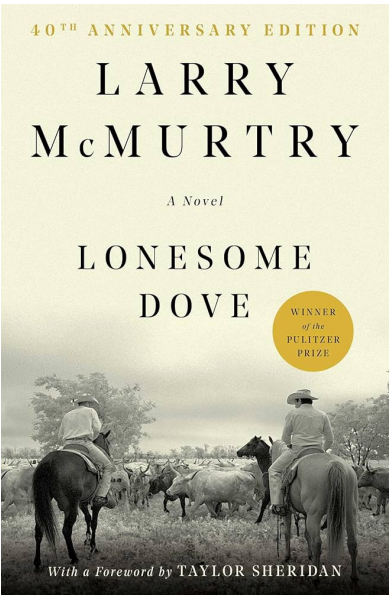
Part of this dialogue is simply good banter between old friends. But as I read the passage, I felt that Gus’ comment points towards something more profound. In fact, I think his words reflect a long-standing American tradition, one that has occasionally participated in an imperialist national project, but which has just as often been critical of that project. Gus’ insight, however vaguely stated, is that Native Americans themselves might possess some similar antipathies towards lawyers, bankers, and others to the east involved in the “scheme”—and that they might be more “interesting,” maybe even having a localist tradition of their own.

The closer I looked at the history, the more it seemed to me that Gus was right. Long before Europeans arrived in North

America, Native peoples had organized themselves in small-scale communities. In the early years of colonialism, Euro-American expansion repeatedly tested the Native practice of relegating political authority to the smallest—or most local—possible level. Even when colonial powers threatened Native nations, their commitment to avoiding centralized power prevented them from combining their shared resources.

A letter from Cherokee leader John Ridge in 1826, for instance, closes by musing about the overall relation between Native peoples and the United States. “Solemn & gloomy is the thought that all the Indian nations who once occupied America are nearly Gone!...It was not their destiny to become great,” Ridge writes. “Their Council fires could not be united into one, as the Seat of a great empire. It was for strangers to effect this.”

Their commitment to local governance clearly put Native nations in a bind. They could surrender their independence and submit to the imperial authority of the United States, subject to ever-greater management by the federal government in Washington. This is the outcome that eventually occurred. Or they could attempt to unite, surrendering the local power of their villages, clans, and nations, to a centralized, militarized confederacy. Either way, they would become part of a “great empire.” As Ridge seems to concede, it was not possible for the Native nations to unite their council



fires into one, since in doing so they would have ceased to be the sorts of communities they were trying to remain.

Yet the tragedies of Native localism of the 18th and 19th centuries have become, in many ways, the triumphs of the 20th and 21st. Native tribes are actually the smallest, most local form of government that are constitutionally protected, since towns, counties, and municipalities are entirely creations of the states. Recent decades have seen Native nations, scholars, and activists acquire more local control and increased tribal independence.

For instance, in 2010, the Tribal Law and Order Act gave tribal courts the right to use greater discretion in passing sentences for crimes already within their jurisdiction. This discretion included both more severe punishments as well as less punitive approaches such as “tribally based restorative justice mechanisms.” The 2013 reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) authorized tribal governments to “exercise special domestic violence criminal jurisdiction over non-Indians who commit acts of domestic violence or dating violence that occur in the Indian country of the participating tribe, as long as the perpetrator has sufficient ties to the prosecuting tribe.” And some observers have suggested that criminal jurisdiction for tribes precisely rests on the principle of “localism” or “subsidiarity,” the conviction that “those closest to the matters to be dealt with best [know] what ought to be

done.” One encourages other advocates of “enlivening tribal sovereignty” to explicitly connect their ideas of localism with the “first principles” of the subsidiarity tradition. He concludes by allowing that traditions of subsidiarity may even “have more to offer Tribes” than American federalism.

For non-Native Americans, then, those in the spirit of Gus McCrae who are frustrated with the seemingly corrupt and antagonistic politics at the national and state levels, and who hold out hope that a smaller, more human scale of political life might be an antidote to some of our greatest ailments, Native American nations can offer a model. They are a sort of *actually existing localism*, a form of life based on localist principles existing right under the noses of American localists and anti-localists alike. They not only offer a procedural model for how to retain local authority and distinctiveness despite great efforts to remove it, but also showcase the sorts of ethical and practical commitments a community must maintain to make local self-government possible. Though it was too late for Gus to seriously re-evaluate his relationship with Native Americans, it might not be for the rest of us. Perhaps today, a cautious reconsideration of the virtues of local authorities informed by Native Americans’ own localism might make it possible for a new—and very different—consensus on the status of tribal nations and of political authority more generally.+

Samuel Piccolo (*Ph.D., Notre Dame*) is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Baruch College, CUNY.

IRRESPONSIBILITY (Continued)

Colin Miller

Like Han, the Christian spiritual tradition calls this obsession with bodily security *slavery*. Today we all know from experience how dehumanizing this slavery is. Constant production leaves us harried and exhausted. Yet our instinct is that if we stop we will lose control and die or—what to most of us is worse—become homeless. But because no one can maintain such a frantic pace, we inevitably burn out. Spreading ourselves always thinner with too many tasks and not enough time, depression and anxiety are on the rise, and many become suicidal. We are killing ourselves trying not to die.

The digital life, then, is the factory ethos — the work mode — totalized. Both tend towards an exclusive focus on bare life — mere biological existence. And both make us equally indisposed towards rest, financial precarity, or bodily danger. This is, ultimately, slavery to the fear of death.

And so what great good news the Gospel is. In this light we can see that the early Church’s prodigal use of resources—voluntary poverty and the sharing of possessions—is just the “economic” application of the their willingness to be martyrs. They are two sides of the same

coin. The “financial” precepts of the Sermon on the Mount, in other words, and the way of the cross, are both essential parts of being a community constituted by its liberation from death. These precepts are the way we *practice* resurrection. Today especially, such practices are what we need to be set free.

For embracing the playfulness of the early Church’s prodigality is to reject the factory ethos’ claim that it is up to us to make our lives turn out right. So we can lavish our goods on the poor, we can put ourselves in harm’s way, and we can refuse to defend ourselves, all in imitation of our

Lord, in order to rediscover true freedom. For the most basic logic of our Christian profession is that it is not our job to be *efficient*, but to be *faithful*, and that God will take care of the rest. It’s the logic of cross and resurrection.

But it’s also the logic of *prayer*. And so it is also a great gift that the Church is primarily a *liturgical* community. It’s a community *constituted* by prayer. Prayer is the ultimate *playful* act. In contrast with the factory ethos, it’s saying “I *don’t* got this, *you* got this.” And this is the key to escaping our lives of self-slavery. For if our world trains us into the work mode of anxious self-reliance, in the Church God has given us a counterculture that trains us to live without fear. So if most of the early Church’s prodigality seems pretty “out there” for us, then simply praying with the Church can be a first step in learning to live—irresponsibly—again.+

Colin Miller (*Ph.D., Duke*) is the Chief Editor of *The Catholic Citizen*.



IT MUST BE USED

By Peter Maurin 1936

Cardinal Newman says:

1. “If the intellect is a good thing, then its cultivation is an excellent thing.
2. “It must be cultivated not only as a good thing, but as a useful thing.
3. “It must not be useful in any low, mechanical, material sense.
4. “It must be useful in the spreading of goodness.
5. “It must be used by the owner for the good of himself and for the good of the world.”

Contact Us

Colin Miller, Director
cmiller@assumptionsp.org
Church of the Assumption
51 West 7th Street
St. Paul, MN 55102
651-224-7536
catholicsocialthought.org

