How the Light of Christ Illuminates the Deeper Reality behind the Social Issues that Plague Our Age

Brent Withers

As scholars and academics, members of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists are not immune to the problem of sometimes overlooking our Catholic focus in our analyses of the social events and problems of the day. This article, whose author has a background in psychology and mental health care services, seeks to challenge us on that point. Without denigrating the incredible contributions natural science has made to human life, particular the field of health care, the article reminds us that many human problems stem from supernatural causes, such as sin, and require divine, rather than human solutions. The article goes on to present some speculations about how things will be during two periods of future history—the time of the antichrist and the era of peace—and concludes by reminding us of some of the subtle but significant things that have happened in the field of faith-based healing of late.

If we exclude key dimensions of reality from our understanding and exploration of the social issues which plague our age, then our insight will be greatly affected. It is the equivalent in the field of medicine where physicians were trying to understand and treat diseases without understanding what today we take for granted as being obvious, such as the washing of hands to prevent disease,¹ and the transmission of diseases by germs.² Before these key breakthroughs and the discovery of the x-ray in 1895 and penicillin in 1928, our understanding and treatment of physical illnesses was very limited. If we move from the physical realm to the psychological it is extraordinary to think that the first lobotomy³ was undertaken in 1935 and the practice was only banned in the 1970s as a treatment for mental disorder. Our understanding of mental illness has led to the advancement in both medication-based treatments, as well as the development of a wide range of psycho-therapeutic interventions. There is a real awareness today of the significant impact of mental distress on our well-being. We also understand the intimate relationship between the mind and body, and so have an increased awareness of the need for psychological-based interventions for people who have long-term physical health problems. For both the physical and psychological dimensions, before essential or key discoveries occurred, our understanding was limited and so the effectiveness of

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treatment approaches was also significantly diminished. In a similar manner, if we do not acknowledge or understand the destructive effects of sin on our lives, and the significance of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our souls, then our view of reality will be impaired. The purpose of this essay is to show that because the moral and spiritual dimensions of reality are missing from our worldview, our understanding into the social issues that plague our age is greatly affected.

THE SOCIAL ISSUES THAT PLAGUE OUR AGE

There is an unfortunate parallel by which the advance of science and technology has also been matched by an increase in the sophistication of organized criminal gangs, not only in the importation and dealing of drugs, but also in money laundering, human trafficking, and cyber-related crime. The existence of drugs such as crack cocaine, methamphetamine-based drugs such as “P” and “spice” (a synthetic cannabis-based drug), produce an intensity in addiction and violent behavior that have not previously been witnessed.

A vicious cycle of poverty, unemployment, poor quality housing, drug use and gang-related criminal activity infects our poorer inner-city neighborhoods. Moving from the community or societal level, if we focus on the family, it is well understood by the Church that the traditional definition and understanding of the family is under attack. Yet, this has led not just to an impaired understanding of the family, but also to a prevalence of family-related violence that is world-wide. The hidden trauma of childhood neglect, as well as psychological, physical, and sexual abuse are tragedies that deprive the most innocent and vulnerable of the one non-material necessity we all crave: unconditional love.

The high rates of imprisonment in many westernized nations and the proliferation of treatment options for mental health and substance abuse highlight the contrasting approaches employed to address these significant issues. The struggle between balancing punishment with rehabilitation weighs heavy around the neck of police, prison, probation, and treatment facilities, which are over-burdened by the scale of the demand on their services. The greatest tragedy, though, is to finish one’s life without having discovered the only person who promised that we are invited to have life to the fullest, and said, “I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full” (Jn. 10:10). The high rates of suicide, especially in westernized societies, highlight the impotence of mankind in the face of one of the most tragic social issues. The words of Jesus come to mind: “without me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5).
How the Light of Christ Illuminates the Reality behind Social Issues

So, what is the solution to the significant social issues that plague our age? It seems that in every attempt to combat the many issues that face society, we on one level appear to be fighting a losing battle. I hope to show in this essay that this situation is largely because two dimensions of reality are missing from our worldview: the moral and spiritual dimensions, moral, in terms of the reality of sin and its destructiveness, and spiritual, as understood within the Catholic Tradition as the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity in the soul of the believer, which is the defining feature of the kingdom of God on earth.

THE MORAL AND SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF REALITY

If we reflect on the physical and psychological dimensions of the human person, our understanding and insights have usually been through human effort alone. The developments in science and technology of our age have led to significant advances in our understanding of these two dimensions. But the challenge we face is that the full reality of the moral and spiritual dimensions is only understood and appreciated through the gift of faith.

The Tradition of the Church teaches that sin on an individual level leads to blindness, where the person loses the light of reason and so is unable to order the use of things in this world to the glory of God. Rather, the goods of this world, which are not bad in and of themselves, become the end goal of life. The result is that the quest for more wealth, power, pleasure, and honor can become the guiding principle of our lives. As we are wired for God, the result of being a slave to sin is an inner restlessness, emptiness, and ultimate frustration in not being able to quench our thirst, as we are only truly satisfied by the living waters from our Lord.

The structural sin that forms the fabric of society allows our understanding of things like the human person, the sanctity of marriage, and our ultimate calling in life, to be completely obscured. Through abortion and euthanasia modern society plays “god,” so to speak, as it seeks to abolish our eternal origin and destiny. The simple and sublime truth that we are created by God to spend all eternity with him in his heavenly kingdom is sadly eliminated from our everyday conversations. The Church’s teaching on marriage as being between a man and a woman, where the complementarity of the sexes is celebrated in the call to be fruitful and multiply, is mocked as being outdated and out of tune with people’s desire to enter into same-sex marriages. What is at stake here is our fundamental identity. Are we sons and daughters of a loving Father in heaven, or is our identity fluid where we can decide our own “self-determined” gender? The tragedy of the structural sin which forms the bedrock of society is that it is not recog-
nized as such. The toxic effect of sin goes unrecognized and only comes to light through repentance and conversion of heart. It is important to understand the interconnectedness of the four dimensions of the human person. When reflecting on the effects of unrepentant sin, this can affect a person not only morally and spiritually, but also psychologically and physically.

I want to briefly take the reader on a journey of faith into two future periods in the Church’s history as revealed to us by her Tradition—the reign of the antichrist and the era of peace. The purpose of this journey is to show how the moral and spiritual dimensions of reality in general, and in relation to the human person in particular, come to life more vividly, as it were, during these periods. I would argue that until these dimensions of reality are universally experienced by the human family, we will not fully accept and understand their significance. It is through this lens that I will be exploring these key future epochs of the Church’s history. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore them fully, however, and I acknowledge the differing views of these matters that exist, especially with regard to the era of peace.

THE ANTICHRIST

We can hypothesize that mankind will only be fully aware of and will only truly accept the reality and the destructiveness of sin in the reign of the antichrist. Isn’t this a bit far-fetched and extreme? Unlike the physical and psychological dimensions of the human person, the truth about sin and its destructiveness is much more uncomfortable to confront and indeed discover and “control,” in the traditional and accepted sense, which is within a scientific and experimental mindset. To see, acknowledge, and accept the full reality of sin and trust in the merciful love of God is a movement and step completely out of kilter from our stance of self-sufficiency. It will be a long, painful, and tortuous journey to the full revelation of the antichrist who will demonstrate the full depravity and ugliness of sin. If we deny sin, we call God a liar, viz. “If we say, ‘We have never sinned,’ we make him a liar, and his word has no place in us” (1 Jn. 1:10). So, what happens if we continue to deny the existence of sin and live in the main separated from Christ and his Church? We eventually reap what we sow. The Church has always been clear in her teachings that the Church and mankind in general will undergo a severe trial in the future. In this trial, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church describes, the “mystery of iniquity” will be revealed:

Before Christ’s second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will unveil the “mystery of iniquity” in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution
to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh. The Antichrist’s deception already begins to take shape in the world every time the claim is made to realize within history that messianic hope which can only be realized beyond history through the eschatological judgement.  

We see the signs of the antichrist in the apostasy of the Church today—in the denial of the moral and spiritual teachings of the Church that were once held by Christian believers in countries that were once predominantly Christian. We also see man attempting to create paradise on earth through technological and scientific means, completely independent from the belief in a loving God who created all and sustains all in existence. The full revelation and horror of sin becomes visible in this reign of terror. If we pause and reflect on the physical realm, we get some understanding of what this must look like. Buy a packet of cigarettes and you will see the ugliness and destruction of smoking depicted vividly in a picture of internal organs blackened and scarred by the effects of smoking. This is an accepted truth. The Tradition of the Church reveals that the effects of sin on the soul are much more horrendous. The wounds of the morally sick were the most offensive, for their source is in the depths of the heart; exteriorly they do not seem so hideous, though they are really far more horrible. Bodily wounds are not so deep they have a more healthful odor; but they who do not understand such things think them the more frightful.

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THE ERA OF PEACE

Our Lord and Savior will have the last word in defeating the antichrist as St. Paul tells us, “The Lord will destroy him with the breath of his mouth and will annihilate him with his glorious appearance at his coming” (2 Thess. 2:8).

Before the second coming of Christ at the general resurrection, where we will be divided into goats (accursed) and sheep (blessed) as vividly described in chapter 25 of St. Matthew’s Gospel, the Tradition of the Church teaches that in all likelihood there will be a period where Christ’s kingdom will truly be alive and well on earth. We say in the Lord’s prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” The kingdom of God exists on earth everywhere that the Blessed Trinity dwells in a soul in a state of grace. The reign of the saints is automatically thought to pertain to the fulfilment of God’s kingdom at the end of time, following the general resurrection. As St. Augustine outlines below, the thousand-year
reign of the saints following the defeat of the antichrist relates to the reign of God’s kingdom on earth. During this period, we can speculate that the vast majority of souls on earth will be intimately united with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:

In the interim, while the devil is bound for a thousand years, the saints reign with Christ, also for a thousand years; and these thousand years are no doubt to be understood in the same way, that is, as the time since Christ’s first coming. This reign is, of course, quite different from the kingdom of which Christ will say at the end, *Come, you who are blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you* (Mt. 25:34). But his saints—to whom he says, *Behold, I am with you until the end of the world* (Mt. 28:20)—are reigning with him even now, although in another and far lesser sense. If this were not so, the Church obviously would not be called his kingdom, or the kingdom of heaven, here and now in the present.

We can speculate during this thousand-year reign of peace that just as there is now an open acknowledgment and understanding about the dangers of smoking, there will be something similar with regard to the case of sin during this period. Without taking away a person’s free choice to commit sin, there will be public warnings and even the banning of sinful activities, just as now we have warnings on cigarette packets and a ban on smoking in many public places. Our current mind-set views suffering, whether physical or psychological in nature, as being essentially meaningless, but we can also hypothesize that the redemptive value of suffering will be appreciated in those days, especially in relation to winning graces for other souls who are struggling in life. In addition, the necessity of God’s grace will be understood to enable us to be holy, or whole and integrated, in all four key dimensions: physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual. This life-long spiritual journey to become holy is therefore not of our own doing—it requires patience without any quick-fix solutions—but our healing process can also mysteriously participate in the flow of grace that can assist others. The era of peace will not eliminate suffering altogether, however, and it is likely that there will always be people who reject God’s grace and so chose to manipulate and inflict harm on others.

**FAITH-BASED HEALING APPROACHES**

Moving back to our present time, do we see now glimpses of what approaches might look like in the future, when society fully acknowledges and understand the four dimensions of the human person? In the medical world today we have many different treatment options which help alleviate the symptoms of a variety of different ailments. Yet we all understand
that just treating the symptoms while failing to identify the underlying cause, especially for serious illnesses, is largely fruitless. X-rays, CAT scans and MRI scans help significantly in diagnosing an underlying cause for a physical ailment, but much of the treatment for mental disorders such as depression and psychosis, whether clinical or psychological in their approach, are symptom-based and fail to address the underlying cause. The contrast with faith-based healing approaches could not be starker:

In most medical and psychological environments, people are not fully seen as whole persons but rather are identified by their diagnosis. While one could argue that scientific diagnoses have an important role in treatment, I would counter that they can also be problematic because they amplify the symptom and often deny the underlying disease. Psychological diagnoses too easily slide into personal identities, all but obliterating our true identity as beloved children of the Father. . . . Since the vast majority of doctors, nurses, psychologists, and therapists have been trained in this mechanistic approach, we have a tendency to treat symptoms more than people. As a result we are more often taught to alleviate the symptoms, without attending to the underlying causes.8

The recognizable hallmark of the scientific approach is a well-defined, time-bound, often economically-driven and, in the final analysis, impatient approach to proving the effectiveness of an intervention or treatment program. St. John of the Cross defines a profound spiritual maxim which has significant consequences for each one of us: “the smallest act of pure love is of greater value in the eyes of God and more profitable to the Church than the greatest works.”9 If the smallest act of pure love is the most critical and important thing in eyes of God, then the violation or absence of love in childhood must equally be of dramatic significance. Deep wounds inflicted on us as a child through the absence of love have life-long negative effects. The resulting belief system, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors which flow from these unhealed wounds are destructive or maladaptive. The healing power of the Holy Spirit sustains a person to enable the wound to be brought from the darkness within their soul into the powerful and healing light and love of the Holy Spirit.10 This is the central goal of the healing-based ministries which have been inspired by the Holy Spirit in recent times.

The temptation to adopt a purely spiritual or religious based healing approach is significant. This is the danger of adopting an either/or approach in our thinking. As described in the passage below, this type of thinking can view, as in the example of depression, that the cause and remedy should be a spiritual one. The reality is of course very different, and highlights the need to combine, where appropriate and depending on
the personal needs of the individual, a physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual approach to treatment, thus mirroring the four key dimensions of the human person:

Christians who suffer from depression, or those close to them, can make the incorrect assumption that their lack of energy and dejected mood are caused exclusively by a spiritual problem. If only the depressed person would engage in the right spiritual exercises, such as reading the Bible or praying more often, or going to Mass or to confession more frequently, he could find a cure for his dark mood and get back on the right spiritual path. If we are dealing with a true case of depression, with roots on the natural level, we should not automatically presume exclusively upon a supernatural cause or cure. It would be unintelligent, for example, for someone with diabetes to rely on divine grace to manage his blood sugar, when the Lord himself placed in the natural order the medical means for dealing with this problem, as well as equipping us with the intelligence to seek out these natural solutions. God makes everyday provision for us precisely through the intelligibilities he has placed in nature and the intelligence he has given us.  

The point made in the passage above is absolutely key. The physical and psychological treatments that have been developed by modern medicine are not made redundant by faith-based approaches. Just as grace builds up or elevates nature, so the supernatural is complemented by treatments developed in the natural order. It is also important to understand the interconnectedness of the four dimensions of the human person. When reflecting on the effects of unrepentant sin, one must remember that they can affect a person not only morally and spiritually, but also psychologically and physically.

THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION

We get an insight into the power of the spiritual dimension when reflecting on how souls who suffer in union with Christ win graces for other souls, and in the case of apostolic or active religious orders, greatly assist both those who are consecrated to our Lord, as well as the people to whom they are bringing the saving love of Christ. Mother Teresa in her letter below describes the mysterious benefit of souls who suffer in union with Christ, and how they are essential to the overall goal of the Missionaries of Charity—“to satiate the thirst of Jesus on the Cross for love of souls.”

I am very happy that you are willing to join the suffering members of the Missionaries of Charity.—You see what I mean—you and the others who will join will share in all our prayers, works and whatever we do for souls—and you do the same with us with your prayers & sufferings. You see, the aim of our Society is to satiate the thirst of Jesus on the
Cross for love of souls by working for the salvation and sanctification of the poor in the slums.—Who could do this better than you & the others who suffer like you? Your sufferings and prayers will be the chalice in which we the working members will pour in the love of souls we gather round. Therefore you are just as important & necessary for the fulfilment of our aim.—To satiate His thirst we must have a chalice—& you & the others—men, women, children, old & young, poor & rich—are all welcome to make the chalice. In reality, you can do much more while on your bed of pain than I running on my feet, but you & I together can do all things in Him who strengthens us.

These words of Mother Teresa to a person who has no faith in Jesus Christ and the power and fruitfulness of suffering will seem puzzling and farfetched. How can someone suffering on their “bed of pain” possibly have an impact on the sisters’ work in the Missionaries of Charity? The reality is, the suffering on its own will not. The bridge, or more accurately the chalice, that brings depth and meaning to our suffering is Christ himself. The work of the sisters in Mother Teresa’s order is both material and spiritual. Throughout her life she was at pains to get people to realize that the work of her order was not social work. This was not to demean the value of social work, but to recognize the deeper dimensions of the human person—the moral and spiritual—and acknowledge how our souls need to be washed clean in the blood of our Savior who died for each one of us. The chalice Mother Teresa refers to is the chalice that our Lord drank—in other words his bitter passion. In the mystery of God’s providence, we are all invited to participate in his plan of redemption for mankind, and so by uniting our sufferings with Christ’ chalice, which he drank to fulfil the will of his Father, we too share mysteriously in his passion and the infinite merits he won through his crucifixion on the cross. God’s grace is what ultimately converts and saves souls. The spiritual dimension, therefore, is critical to the salvation of every single person. If Christ’s infinite thirst is for souls to accept his merciful love, then work undertaken in the spiritual realm contributes to the satiation of that thirst. Of course, it is not work as we normally think of work. Prayers and sufferings offered to God on a purely material (physical) and indeed psychological level seem, from the outside looking in, to be a waste of time. It is this dimension though, which is not only critical to the work undertaken by the Missionaries of Charity, but I would maintain is also critical for the alleviation of the social issues that plague our age.

Venerable Patrick Peyton promoted the family rosary and coined the catchy slogan, “The family that prays together stays together.” His tireless promotion of the rosary was extraordinary and a witness itself to the
power of that form of prayer. During his lifetime, he organized rosary events in more than forty countries, gathering over twenty-eight million people to pray the rosary.\(^{15}\) As he himself describes, “Because of the daily family rosary, my home was for me a cradle, a school, a university, a library, and most of all, a little church.”\(^{16}\) He describes the outcome of families praying the daily rosary: “Countless families the world over invite Mary to their homes through the family rosary. She comes. They sense her presence. They solve their problems because where Mary is present there is Christ, her Divine Son.”\(^{17}\) These are the words and conviction of a living saint who through lived experienced discovered the power of the rosary in his own family and then with bold faith proclaimed its effects in other families who also pray the family rosary. There we have a solution to family breakdown and family-related violence! One could argue this is the solution to all the social ills, because if every family prayed with faith the daily rosary, children growing up would receive the love and compassion from their parents that flows from the hearts of Jesus and Mary. They would therefore have the grounding to live loving and fruitful lives. If only it was that simple! Perhaps it will be like this in the era of peace. The bridge between now and the era of peace will be through suffering and prayer. It will be souls uniting their sufferings with Christ and rosary prayer groups winning graces for families to, if not stay together, at least move one small step closer to making the world a home of love and compassion.

Notes

1. Ignaz Semmelweis, a Hungarian doctor working in Vienna General Hospital, is known as the father of hand hygiene. In 1846, he noticed that the women giving birth in the medical student/doctor-run maternity ward in his hospital, where the doctors washed their hands, were much more likely to develop a fever and die compared to the women giving birth in the adjacent midwife-run maternity ward, where the midwives did.

2. Louis Pasteur was a French scientist who discovered germs and proved a direct connection between germs and disease in 1861.

3. A lobotomy is a surgical operation involving incision into the prefrontal lobe of the brain, formerly used to treat mental illness.


5. CCC No 675-676.


10. Schuchts, *Be Healed*.


12. Schuchts, *Be Healed*.


15. Ibid.


17. Ibid.