

Affirming what is. . .



We seem to be harsh critics of the “world” and “culture” and “society” in our preaching and our teaching all the time. It is, I suppose, a function of taking sin very seriously, and the imbalance in our preaching that makes it so.

Sin and evil are regarded as insidious, deceptive, destructive and malevolent forces, such that a high degree of vigilance is called for. The Apostle Peter puts it in most vivid terms: *“Keep sober and alert, because your enemy the devil is on the prowl like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand up to him, strong in faith . . .”* (1 Peter 5:8)

However, this does not mean that we cannot or should not affirm the good things of “the world,” “the culture,” and/or “society.”

There are, for sure, aspects of secular culture which are good and true. The Second Vatican Council expressed this in the following way: *“This council, first of all, wishes to assess in this light those values which are most highly prized today and to relate them to their divine source. Insofar as they stem from endowments conferred by God on man, these values are exceedingly good.”* (Church in the Modern World, 11)

So, for example, we can and should affirm the emergence of attitudes for justice expressed in observing the equal dignity of women to men and challenging the evil of racism: It is right and good that these matters be pressed and that instances of sexism and racism be challenged with a goal of bringing the whole society to a level of enlightenment about the truth of the human person. The Church should and does affirm such good developments in society and recognizes that

there is still a way to go toward true and full justice in these areas.

By and large, the Church is also able to affirm the many goods that have come about from the industrial, technological and medical revolutions which have transformed our lives over the past hundred years. So much good has been done, and so much suffering alleviated by so many of these developments. Who among us would trade 21st century health-care for that of the 18th or 19th century?

We can and should affirm the good when and where we see it and from whomever is its source. But in every thing we detect the taint of sin and error; there are errors and distortions which ‘piggy back’ onto the efforts of those with good intentions. When, for example, the good effort to assert the equality of the sexes becomes one to obliterate any real difference between male and female, there is a loss and a distortion. Somehow, real difference was made to be the enemy of equality; whereas, in the view of faith it is part of the structures of beauty and love.

I cannot touch upon each and every example, but we often find that the “good” we want to affirm needs to be purified from some distortion, or taint of human pride. *“It cannot be denied that men are often diverted from doing good. . . born with a bent toward evil, [man] finds new inducements to sin, which cannot be overcome without strenuous efforts and the assistance of grace.”* (ibid #24)