



John C. Gallagher, *A New Dawn,
or the Fading of the Light?
Culture and Evangelization Today*
Bloomington, IN: Westbow Press, 2019,
pp. 262

Rev. John Gallagher, a member of the Congregation of St Basil, based in Toronto, Canada, offers in this book a wide ranging analysis and discussion of the many issues pertaining to evangelization of culture today. Inspired by Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) and its challenge to the Church to evangelize culture and to seek to transform culture as a means of evangelization. For many years as a professor of moral theology Father Gallagher became aware of the cultural forces that either help or hinder people from receiving the traditional Catholic teaching. He found that the majority of those writing in English on the topic think it is a matter of adjusting Catholic teaching to fit contemporary thinking, even contemporary tastes. But he argues along the lines of Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that we must rather seek to create Christian culture. This book steers the discussion in that direction and it deals with a number of issues that are neglected in current writings in English. This book does not seek to formulate a specific plan for evangelization, focusing instead on the process of evangelization in terms of its constituent elements so as to assist those who are responsible for a program of evangelization. His main thesis is that characteristics of modern life, especially secularism, have made the "default position" for men and women of today that life can be lived without any reference to God; therefore, Christian must seek to influence the culture of today to make reference to the transcendent as regular part of human

life when lived to the full. This thesis emerges out of the four parts structuring the book: one—Situating the Issue, two—Evangelization and Contemporary Western Culture, three—The Products of Culture, and four—Building a Christian Culture. Parts two and four are the predominant chapters in articulating the thesis. Part one discusses faith and culture as the drama of our time and the complexity of their relation and interactions. He also explains the new tasks for evangelization today, particularly the need to re-evangelize people in the west. He ends the first part with a very insightful account of the living faith that needs to be communicated to people of today. Part two elaborates on the characteristics of western modern life that impact the life of faith such as the meaning and impact of secularization, the reduction of ethics to a minimalistic standard in public life, the positive and negative aspects of mass media, and the pervasiveness of individualism, the privatization of religion, and the “eclipse of virtue.” Part three is a brief account of the products of culture most needed to develop, namely virtue, identity, and community. Finally, in part four, on building a Christian culture, Fr. Gallagher draws on many years of experience as a priest, teacher, and scholar to note the key methods, milestones, and achievements for the evangelization of culture. Sometimes evangelization is associated primarily with instruction. This book goes into more traditional aspects of evangelization that are too often neglected, such as symbols, history, conversation, and identification with respected persons.

In his final chapter, Gallagher offers some brief reminders to “a church that evangelizes culture.” His first counsel is to avoid the mistake of thinking that the gospel message will be more attractive if it “demands less effort and is less insistent on moral restrictions.” As a general strategy, however, the path of accommodation to the views and practices of the secular world has not been successful in converting secularists to the Christian faith or even retaining membership in the Church. The Protestant Churches that have lost the most members in recent decades for the most part are those that have accommodated most to “the world.” The real interaction between the faith and culture has usually been much more creative than just adopting beliefs and practices of secular society.

Just the empirical evidence suggest that the reverse is true, and we recall St John Paul II’s admonition to “be not afraid” of the demands of the Gospel. Gallagher explains that a period of learning and “putting off the old man” is essential to Christianity. He also offers a reminder that “Christian culture takes place in the way people act, including the meaning and attitudes with which they act” (p. 231). This is a call to reflection in the midst of practice and it requires value of small communities and groups to meet and pray upon their action and projects in light of the gospel. It also recalls to me Cardinal Wojtyła’s stress upon “deepening the understanding of faith” and the formation of Christian attitudes as the source of renewal in the Church and society.

There is much to be gleaned from this book. I would like to point to a few very relevant discussions for the topic of evangelization and the Church's teaching on family and sexuality as put forward in *Humanae Vitae*. He makes a passing reference to this document when he discusses the resistance to moral norms by the culture at large and ethical dissent within the Church. With the case of the Church's position on artificial contraception, because it has failed to persuade many people within the Church and outside, some have advised a change in the teaching and an adaption to the demands and the conveniences of modern life. Yet he reminds us that the position is not arbitrary but the result of careful thought and long experience. A convincing defense is possible as shown by Pope John Paul II and the theology of the body (p. 177). But if we go back to main challenges to evangelization, such as secularism, technology, and autonomy, the promotion and development of the issues raised in *Humanae Vitae* exemplify the way the Church must respond and continue to preach the good news in modern society. The complex elements of a secular society hit particularly hard at the sanctity of life and respect for fertility. Secularism is the exclusion of reference to God in life and the failure to integrate religion with life. It is fueled by the attitudes of scientific reductionism and technological mastery. Efficiency of results is the standard often invoked throughout all sectors of modern society. Gallagher argues that there is a certain passivity and lack of critical thinking about the claims and promises of the technology. As a result, modern culture reverts by default to the secularist position. But there is a creeping sense of a lack of meaning in life and a neglect of the value of the person. A robust education about the meaning of the personal life through the law of the gift and mutual respect should serve to offer an alternative to the loneliness and anguish of modern life. As John Paul II said in *Redeemer of Man*, "man cannot live without love" (§ 10). Gallagher explains the difference between technological solutions and personal solutions to problems of life. The technological solution requires little personal effort; whereas the development of virtue draws upon personal commitment to change behavior and cultivate new or deeper attitudes appropriate to human life. The priority of ethics over technology points to ethos as a way of life, or the morality of virtue. Gallagher points out that "the moral life is the very gratifying project of becoming the kind of person who can appreciate and attain things that expand human possibilities and enrich life" (p. 121). Evangelization is accompanied by a call to conversion, a personal, not a technological, response to the situation. "The call to conversion is a call to develop virtues, which is a call to enter into a fuller life made possible by the Holy Spirit" (p. 122). The primary imperative for the new evangelization therefore must be to break out of the secular mind set (pp. 162–165). Gallagher sees in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* a great path forward in its encouragement of wonder and the contemplative attitude, a willingness to engage ultimate questions, a consideration of the "whole truth" about the

human person, interdisciplinary approaches to the issues, and the integration of faith and reason. In addition, maintaining a historical perspective, formulating a rich narrative of Christian life, and establishing personal identity as a Christian will provide further means for the new evangelization.

Gallagher's book provides a wide range of ideas and perspectives for the task of evangelization. As its title suggests, although the light is fading in the more secularized countries and sectors of the world today, we may eagerly anticipate a new dawn because of authentic Christian humanism. As St John Paul II expressed it: "The name for that deep amazement at man's worth and dignity is the Gospel. That is to say the Good News. This amazement determines the Church's mission in the world and, perhaps even more so, in the modern world" (*Redeemer of Man*, § 10). Fr. Gallagher's book offers us way to understand how to strategically find ways to boldly and effectively proclaim this good news.

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