

A Catholic Comment on *For the Life of the World*

By Ingeborg G. Gabriel

Allow me to start with a personal remark: As a Roman Catholic Christian and theologian specialized in social ethics, I am most grateful for this comprehensive theological document on individual ethical, political, social, as well as ecological issues coming from the Orthodox Church. In scope as well as in intention it might be best compared to *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), the Pastoral Constitution of Vatican II (1965) of the Roman Catholic Church. It takes up the same issues more than half a century later and will inspire Orthodox as well as other Christians, contributing to a deeper theological and ethical understanding of current global trends in the light of the Gospel and giving sorely needed ethical orientation to all who approach it in good faith. It will hopefully strengthen Christian voices in a rapidly changing world, as well as support intra-Christian reflection and action on social and political matters, each of which is a *sine qua non* for Christian credibility in our age. In view of the breadth of the topics treated in *For the Life of the World* (FLW), the following lines can be but a first reflection, which must leave aside many important issues. I will offer a short introduction on the question of Christianity's relationship with modernity – the essential context of FLW – and then give an overview of its three main lines of inquiry: individual ethics, modern political culture (including the Christian social ethos with its core emphasis on human rights), and the tensions between pluralism and unity.

The Theological Framework: Christianity in the Modern World

Modernity by definition means change. In its introduction and at several other points in the text, FLW gives an overview of the present situation – characterized by globalization, pluralization, and secularism, as well as by complex technical and ecological developments whose final outcome cannot be foreseen. Its intention in giving such an overview is similar to that of GS: to sketch the context in which Christians live and act today and thereby to map out the intellectual challenges posed to the Church and the world by this particular age. These challenges are of a very particular character, since – and FLW stresses this on several occasions – modernity is itself the secular offspring of Christian culture, which makes for a complex, often frictional, *sui generis* relationship. This complexity has, at times, led to nostalgic idealizations of the past, which hamper an objective and non-polemical view of modernity (§11). Such anti-modern worldviews, which we find in all the tradition-conscious churches, constitute a grave temptation since they remain theologically fruitless and unsatisfactory, as well as coun-

terproductive with regard to the articulation of the Gospel in this very age, which is – as the beautiful formulation of the Ecumenical Social Word of the Churches in Austria puts it – “as much God's age as every age.”¹ Moreover, such anti-modernism is stunning insofar as Christianity (depending substantially in this respect on its roots in Judaism) is the religion *par excellence* of divine presence, or present-ness (in the Eucharist), and of the promise of futurity, since its central belief is that the world is guided through history by the triune God who promises to bring this history to a final good end.

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These incarnational and eschatological dimensions of Christian faith should enable the Church to be a prophetic voice in this and every age. To do this effectively, she has to analyse its social trends so as to form ethical and theological judgements on current developments and to proclaim the great vision of God's saving justice that will be, we believe, fulfilled in “a new heaven and a new earth in which

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justice reigns” (1 Peter 3:13). The dynamics of a modern “run-away world” (Anthony Giddens) make this an intellectually as well as practically demanding endeavor, which can only be compared to that of the days of the early Church. It is this intention that is reflected in the first chapter of FLW, which has the title: *It is time to serve the lord*. Here FLW gives an overview over the way it intends to answer these modern challenges, by articulating clear positions of an Orthodox social ethos in a language that is theologically differentiated, biblically well-founded (§6), and also accessible for theologically less educated readers. It offers, generally speaking, a refreshing candidness even as it refrains from polemics when addressing the hot irons of our day. Anybody who has ever tried to write such a text knows that this is in itself a major achievement, for which the authors are to be congratulated. To acknowledge the positive potential of an epoch (as of a person) despite all its sin and corruption is the outcome of a spiritual vision rooted deeply in a faith that is able to discern the seeds of the world to come in present realities and thus to give orientation and hope.² To cite but one core sentence that formulates this intention with admirable clarity: “Our spiritual lives, therefore, cannot fail also to be social lives. Our piety cannot fail also to be an ethos” (§3).

The Christian Ethos as an Individual, a Political, and a Social Ethos

The document starts with a comprehensive theological anthropology (§1-7). This focus on the human person is itself a clear statement, since it counters a widespread tendency, not only in Orthodoxy, to equate modernity with individualism and to nurture unrealistic traditionalist hopes for the return to a former, supposedly more communal, age. The corrective offered by FLW is that a biblically-founded Christian theology must not reject modernity’s individualism but rather deepen and widen its understanding of the

human person on the basis of its Christian sources, leading modernity back to an appreciation of its theological and anthropological roots as grounds for ethical engagement (§5). This approach also avoids an unjustified opposition between humanism and Christianity and thus between an anthropocentric and a theocentric worldview. The respect for each human person and for the sanctity of life has its ultimate foundations in the creation of humanity in the image of the triune God – foundations which also underlie our being called to communion with Him (§1).³

With regard to the hot irons of the present politically-charged culture wars, FLW formulates clear positions without falling prey to a tendency of giving more space to them than they deserve. It thus provides a much-needed counterweight in what have become politically-, socially-, and often also ecclesially-overheated debates, which tend to obscure the real issues and take away energy from other, often more important, ethical and political topics. We may take note in particular of FLW’s passage on “zero tolerance” regulations on sexual abuse (§16), and of its demand for utter respect toward humans with different sexual orientations (§20). It clearly formulates the ethical arguments against elective abortion (§25). Contrary to the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, and deploying good arguments on this front, the document stresses both the possibility of re-marriage and the (pastorally-essential) allowance for non-Orthodox spouses to receive Holy Communion in the Orthodox community (§21). Of particular importance is also the argument for gender equality with its (welcome) Patristic references, as well as an Orthodox *mea culpa* for not promoting this equality sufficiently over the course of history.⁴ Even more remarkable is the plea that the Orthodox Church should “remain attentive to the promptings of the Spirit in regard to the ministry of women” discerning how women can “best participate in building up the body of Christ, including a renewal of the order of the female diaconate for today” (§29). The question of ministry is, in this way, not tied only to tradition, but opened to genuine consideration of the ecclesial common good in the present tense – a spiritually and theologically sophisticated approach that, one hopes, will find an echo in Roman Catholicism and other churches.

Main Pillars of FLW’s Political and Social Ethos

Sergei Bulgakov employed a congenial metaphor comparing modernity to a sphinx, the half-man and half-beast that devours all passersby who do not respond to its questions.⁵ These questions are complex and by no means homogeneous, since (if it is seen as a period of about two and a half centuries) modernity contains within its span a wide variety of intellectual traditions and cultural phases.

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One could, for instance, say that modernity is prevalently individualistic yet is just as much institutional, in that its humanistic impulse is directed towards improving the human lot through political institutions, through laws, checks, and balances, and through a division of powers so as to mitigate the human suffering that stems from political arbitrariness and violence. The reflections in FLW on these issues are most productive. The theological arguments brought forward, which have hardly ever been articulated to this degree of clarity in any official church document, could also be subscribed to by Roman Catholic Christians. All Christians owe their first and foremost loyalty to the Kingdom of God (Acts 5:29), which is our critical standard for evaluating any political and social system. One of the core statements of FLW is, therefore, that the Orthodox Church cannot be neutral *vis-à-vis* the political order. Thus it corrects a time-honored but basically faulty reading of Romans 13:1-7, which interprets the Pauline text as promoting unconditional obedience to state authority (§9). By contrast to this reading, FLW makes the positive claim that a constitutional, human-rights-based democratic and civil order is ethically superior to undemocratic systems of state authority because it causes less harm and allows for the fuller development of human persons. Even though it is, like any this-worldly structure, not perfect, democracy constitutes according to our present knowledge the most humane way to organize political power. The guarantee of human rights in political systems other than autocratic or totalitarian states allows humans, including but not only Christians, to exercise their freedom by actively contributing to the transformation of the world. It is for these reasons that the language of human rights is generally embraced in FLW (§10 and §61-67).

These texts deserve a more detailed analysis than can be undertaken here, but it is important to note that they formulate a clear and poignant position against any form of anti-modernism (including various excesses of postmod-

ernism) and/or cultural relativism. Such a clear statement by the Orthodox Church is of importance in a globalized world that is not characterized by “a clash between civilizations” but rather by a “clash within civilizations” – wherever human rights are contested and curtailed by autocratic impulses. This recognition is complemented in FLW by a harsh condemnation of any form of “Christian nationalism,” racism, and the “most insidious ideologies of identity,” which are incompatible with the Gospel and are in essence betrayals of Christ (§11).

In this context, FLW also formulates what may be called a new interpretation of the theory of *symphonia* (§12). Against laicist and secularist positions (§13; §80f) it calls for a “direct and robust” cooperative model, creatively reinterpreting the traditional concept in the sense of an extended cooperation between church and state for the sake of the common good, which – being “opposed to the mere formal protection of individual liberties, partisan interests, and the power of corporations – is the true essence of a democratic political order” (§14).⁶ One of the present dangers of liberal political culture is indeed that it may tip into a despotic secularism that silences the voices of faith in public.⁷ The aim of the Church must therefore be to strengthen the civil sphere as a place where different worldviews (with their diverse positions on social and political issues) can be heard and where partisan polarizations are held at bay so as not to strangle free discourse. Although no political order can “be fully adequate to all that God intends for his creatures,” human rights mirror Christian universalism in the sense that they give “priority to human goods over national interests” (§11). This theology of human rights constitutes one of the strongest chapters of FLW, including the passage on religious freedom (§64). For lack of space, I will not comment on Chapter V (War, Peace, and Violence: §42-50) and its ethical reflections on violence as sin *par excellence*, beyond noting the unconditional (and ecumenically-significant) rejection of capital punishment (§48) – a position that corresponds with a central concern of Pope Francis.

Another pillar of the document is constituted by its arguments on social justice, since Jesus’ “concern and compassion for the poor and disenfranchised, the abused and neglected, the imprisoned, the hungry, the weary and heavy-laden, the despairing,” are obviously central to New Testament ethics – which are to be followed by anyone “who aspires to be a follower of Christ” (§6). The issue is taken up at length in Chapter IV, which in strong words formulates what in Catholic liberation theology and later in Catholic social thought has been called the “option for the poor.” The Orthodox Church is called to place the concern “for the poor and disadvantaged at the very centre of its moral, religious, and spiritual life” (§33). This com-

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mandment of love for the least and marginalized has been present, though variably realized, since the earliest days of Christianity. Today, the commandment of love asks for our courageous criticism of a world in which “gross inequalities of wealth” exist and where “cheap labour at the expense of the welfare of workers... particularly in labor markets where basic workers’ protections do not exist” (§35f) abounds. Social safety, health insurance, and medical care are global necessities. The topical issues of slavery (§65f) and migration (§67) are given ample space (as is also the case in contemporary Catholic social thought, and in all international documents on human rights).⁸ It is regrettable, however, that here (as in most secular as well as ecclesial texts) the language of human rights remains individual and is not applied more robustly to the category of social rights.

Finally, the ethical question of technology as a massive human experiment is taken up, with the document insisting on the need to overcome the gap between science and faith. FLW sums up the most important points of other Orthodox documents on ecology by calling for an “ascetic ethos, that can reorient the human will in such a way as to restore its bond with all of creation” (§73-76). Many of these thoughts closely correspond with the reflections of Pope Francis in his eco-social encyclical *Laudato Si’* (2015), such that a more in-depth comparison of the two texts and their arguments would be of substantial ecumenical benefit.

Pluralism and Unity in an Age of Globalization

Together with globalization and secularization, pluralism constitutes one of the signs of the age. FLW affirms that it can be a basis for cultural enrichment and “one of the special glories of our age,” and counts it as “a blessing that all human cultures, in all their variety and beauty, are coming more and more to occupy the same civic and political spaces” (§12). This vision of a pluralized global culture, however, is not a free-for-all, as it presupposes a common ethical ground and core political values. Although it surpasses the scope of this article to comment in depth on FLW’s treatment of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, I can affirm the profound ecumenical significance of the document’s ethical perspectives on intercultural exchange. The passage on interreligious dialogue (§55f), for instance dealing


with the relationship of Orthodox Christianity to Judaism, are inspiring. With regard to Orthodox relations with non-Orthodox Christians, FLW refers to our common baptism, the legitimacy of common prayer, and the need to “repent of past misunderstandings and offences against their brothers and sisters, and to love one another as fellow servants and heirs of the Kingdom of God” (§52).

Admittedly, it is surprising that here (as in §54) the Bible as the word of God is not mentioned as a common basis for a Christian ethos. Moreover, Christians should ask themselves (as the document is not quite able to do) whether intra-Christian pluralism could not also be regarded as such a richness, since no single tradition is able to exhaust “the inscrutable riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8). Nevertheless, the document succeeds admirably in communicating a social ethos that respects pluralism in the public sphere – which is necessary for Christian credibility today and must be reflected in our relations towards the other, since otherwise our message becomes incomprehensible and even scandalous for secular as well as other religious worldviews, as I know from many encounters. This age can be a *kairos* moment for the churches, if Christian anthropology and social ethics can become credible to others through charity, hospitality, and openness toward secular and other religious institutions.

However, cooperation between Christians is not only a matter of credibility, but also a pragmatic question. Substantial competence is needed in complex areas like poverty reduction, ecology, international tax regimes, and so forth. Christians will only be able to make a viable input if they can productively link their ethical and theological visions to the social and political realities and debates of the day. Cooperation with the multitude of secular institutions active in these fields thus also becomes also a matter of human resources. To effectively promote a Christian social ethos in the public sphere (whether on a local, national, or international level), and to cooperate with other networks with similar concerns, each requires a resolute engagement of Christians with the world around them, within which their lives are constituted. Such engagement is of even greater importance in the present situation, since these institutions, which despite their deficits guarantee a minimum international order, are increasingly threatened and under political pressure from major national actors. Meanwhile, although church institutions are strong in their worldwide charitable activities, at the level of political advocacy they tend to be (as somebody put it for the European context) “paralysed giants.” It is worth comparing FLW’s treatment of these issues with the comparable material in *Laudato Si’* on dialogue (§163-201).⁹ There, a reminder of earlier ecumenical documents on social ethics is inserted,

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particularly of the three European Ecumenical Assemblies (1989; 1997; 2007) and of the *Charta Oecumenica* (2001), which were passed with the strong support from the Orthodox Churches and which outlined an agenda as well as a series of self-commitments with regard to Christian representation vis-a-vis public institutions. These earlier documents could serve as inspiration for Orthodox no less than for ecumenical social ethics today.¹⁰

One of the most important questions for the future of Christianity is whether its institutions are able to take up the humanistic, political, and social impulses of modernity, which have become global, without foregoing justified criticism of them. A Christian hermeneutics of suspicion that debunks the world *in toto* as a place of evil is not credible: it does not do justice to ongoing ethical dynamics and it easily collapses into ideological or cultural warfare. Even if there might be good reasons for pessimism, Abraham's pleading to God for the salvation of the city (Genesis 18:20-33) and Jesus' prayers for all in need of help are better models for Christians than the attitude of the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14). It is encouraging to see that FLW gives strong testimony to such a constructive Christian humanism in its "prophetic witness of hope and joy in a world wounded by its rejection of God" (§80). Moreover, the document's "prophetic vocation demands a refusal to remain silent in the face of injustices, falsehoods, cruelties, and spiritual disorders; and this is not always easy, even in modern free societies" (§80). From a Catholic Christian point of view, it is to be hoped that FLW will be widely discussed both across and beyond the Christian family, inspiring many practical initiatives and ecumenical collaborations. 

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Notes:

1. This Social Word was written and signed by the 14 churches in Austria after a long process of preparation in 2003: the text may be downloaded at www.sozialwort.at. It has been complemented by a research project on the social ethos of the Christian churches, with publications on solidarity, human rights, reconciliation, and ecological issues: <https://se-ktf.univie.ac.at/forschung/publikationen>.
2. In Catholic social thought, this is expressed in the concept of "the signs of the times," which require us not only to analyse current trends but also "to decipher the authentic signs of God's presence and purpose" in them (GS 4). Cf. Ingeborg Gabriel, "Christianity in an Age of Uncertainty: A Catholic Perspective," in Peter L. Berger (ed), *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 124-51.
3. This insight is unfolded at greater length in Chapter III (§15-31), which contains many ethical reflections on the course of human life from conception to death. Of particular significance is this chapter's extensive reflection on the "protection and care of children," including a commitment to combat child labor and child abuse, which also offers ethical considerations of adolescence and sexuality.
4. The Roman Catholic Church has pronounced a similar *mea culpa* in the jubilee celebration of John Paul II in Lent 2000 for the sins of the Church – a pronouncement that has, however, largely been forgotten. See http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20000312_pardon.html.
5. Sergei Bulgakov, *Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology* (Evanston: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary: 1934), 10.
6. A similar option can be found in the Declaration on Religious Freedom of Vatican II (*Dignitatis humanae*), §4, 6.
7. For a democratic interpretation of the common good, see Ingeborg G. Gabriel, *Ethik des Politischen: Grundlagen – Prinzipien – Konkretionen* [Ethics of the political: foundations, principles, concretions] (Echter: Würzburg 2020), 143-62.
8. For instance, in the Universal Declaration (§22-26), in the Pact on Social and Economic Rights (1966), and in the Vienna Declaration of Human Rights of 1993. For a history of social rights see Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).
9. http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf.
10. http://www.ceceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Charta_Oecumenica.pdf: "We commit ourselves to seek agreement with one another on the substance and goals of our social responsibility, and to represent in concert, as far as possible, the concerns and visions of the churches vis-à-vis the secular European institutions."