

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
December 1, 2019
Spiritual Ponderings
How Christianity Saved Civilization...

As we enter into the month of December we also enter into the season of Advent. Advent is a time in which we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ into the world – God becoming Man. What we celebrate is not some mythological event but rather something that actually happen in history and had a profound impact on history. Authors Mike Aquilina and James Papandrea attempt to demonstrate to their readers that the impact of Christ is far more reaching than we realize. They point out in their book that Christ and His Mystical Body (the Catholic Church) has changed the world in seven ways. Over the month of December, I would like to explore these seven ways in which Christ and His Church changed the world. Quotes from their book, *How Christianity Saved Civilization... and Must Do So Again*, will be in bold and my commentary will be in normal font.

The early church was nothing if not countercultural, to the extent that even slaves and former slaves could become bishops. As we present them here, the seven revolutions change the world by changing human relationships, an ever-widening concentric circles, beginning with the individual and extending outward to the world. A revolution of the individual affirm that all people are created equal, and the image of God, and no one is expendable. A revolution of the home affirmed as a place of safety and love, where women and children are not to be exploited. A revolution of the workplace affirmed the people are not property, but they must be free to choose their work, and that they must be given the free time to worship, for artistic expression, and for the enjoyment of their loved ones. A revolution of religion taught the world that God is love. A revolution of community taught people to love their neighbor. A revolution of the way people thought about life-and-death rejected the culture of death and affirm a culture of life and of hope, encouraging people to stand up for human rights. And finally, a revolution of government set of the ideal that rulers should serve those whom they rule (not the other way around), and it all people should enjoy freedom of religion. In short, these revolutions can be understood as cultural revolutions that promoted the protection of all human life and the protection of each person's dignity and freedom.

I can still remember in grade school learning about computers on a Commodore 64. I knew that the invention of computers was going to change the world but I had no idea just how much they would. In the same way I can remember the "old brick" cell phone but I could never predict smart phones. The coming of a child always changes the world for the better. No one on that first Christmas would know how much the infant laying in a manger on Christmas day would change the world.

Although it is easy to name instances in which Christians have not lived up to the ideals of the church, it only because of the church gave us those ideals that we cannot recognize and critique such human failures. In other words, without the precedents that Christianity established with regard to the protection of life, dignity, and freedom, we should have no standards by which to judge any person or group (including the church herself) fails to protect human rights. The dignity of the human person comes from the fact that we were created in God's image. Before we human beings learned this lesson from Jesus human beings were all utilitarians (base value on things by how useful they were.) Jesus also changed the way we looked at God. God was no longer some sort of super human being like Zeus who had to be appeased. Jesus reveals to us God is a being beyond our comprehension but who at His heart resembles more the loving Father in the Prodigal Son Story than any judge, emperor, or dictator.

The Christian church was born in the Roman Empire. At that time, the "known world" was an empire that stretch from Spain to Israel and surrounded the Mediterranean Sea. Christianity emerged on the far eastern end of the umpire and spread all the way across to the Western end remarkably quickly, amid a wide range of diverse religions that were practiced in the vast region. Yet, as a religion, Christianity was different from anything that had come before it. In part, this is because the world had yet to see a religion that combined an open membership policy with strict moral expectations. Anyone was invited to join the church, but once a person joins, he was expected to make a serious commitment to changing his lifestyle.

One of my favorite religious movies growing up was *The Robe*. The movie told the fictious story of a Roman soldier who was present when Christ died and won the "robe" that they played dice for in the Scriptures. The movie shows the great difference between the Emperor of Rome (who thought he was a god) and the followers of the Jewish Fisherman.

Romans at the time of the early Church had a different set of morals and ideas than the followers of Christ. The fact that the Roman Empire would become Catholic ever definitely is a good argument that the Church was divinely instituted.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

December 9, 2019

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As we travel closer to Christmas this year through the season of Advent, I have felt it important to share with you some great insights into how Jesus Christ's first coming into the world on the first Christmas changed the world. To help us see how Christ truly impacted the world, I am sharing with you some reflections that I have had after reading authors Mike Aquilina and James Papandrea's book: ***How Christianity Saved Civilization... and Must Do So Again***. Quotes from their book will be in bold and my commentary will be in normal font.

First Revolution: The Individual/The Person

In the realm of the individual, the church revolutionized the way society define personhood. To affirm the universal dignity of human life requires the strong to speak up for and defend the weak, those who cannot speak for themselves. For some people in the ancient world, the ability to speak was a very litmus test of humanity. Those who could not speak (babies) and those who cannot speak the language of civilization (the "barbarians," who did not speak Greek or Latin) were considered less than fully human and were denied the benefits of society. One Roman writer said that because they cannot talk, babies were more like vegetables than like human beings. Yet from the very beginning, the church affirmed the value of all human life and resisted exploitation and dehumanization. Because of Christianity, this way of looking at humanity became so much a part of Western culture they eventually the Constitution of the United States would be built on the concept that all people are created equal (though this stipulation would not be applied to everyone at first). Long before the Constitution was applied equally to all people in this country, the Catholic Church had already condemned abortion, the abuse of children, and slavery.

Saint John Paul II in his Theology of the Body explained that love is a desire to want the best for the other person even if it requires a sacrifice on our part. This means that the opposite of love is not hate but rather objectification.

Objectivation meaning that we will use another person for own gratification even it means hurting them. Jesus was the first person to unite love of God with love of neighbor and love of self. Our society seems to be wanting to go back to the idea that certain people are objects or that you have to earn your value by what you produce.

"We are equally forbidden," wrote Tertullian, "to wish ill, to do ill, to speak ill, to think ill of everyone. The thing we must not do to an emperor, we must not do to anyone else."

In a world where slavery was forced to serve their masters and gladiators forced to fight for people's entertainment the Church began talking about loving others. The idea of treating a slave the same way a person would treat the emperor would have seemed totally foolish and absurd. There is no cast system within the Catholic Church. We believe God loves us all equally.

It takes a real effort of the imagination for us to see the world the way it was in ancient Rome. We have to abandon all our notions of equal rights under the law. In that day and age, there was only a small minority who had rights – Roman Citizens.

In the ancient world, it was often the one with the most power got his way. There was no such thing as a "fair" trial by your peers. Roman Citizens could force their slaves to do anything they wanted them to do including prostitution work. Women and slaves could not be called as witnesses in a court of law. People's value in the ancient world was dependent upon his or her usefulness to the state. Once you were no longer of any use to the state (or your family) you would be euthanized.

Some of the greatest lessons, I have learned in life have come from people who had terminal diagnosis. I also cannot imagine what life would be like wondering at all times when someone would consider me useless and have me killed legally.

A girl was a burden on her father. She could not get a job and contribute to the family's wealth; instead she represented a colossal expense because she would require a dowry once she was of marriageable age. The Roman playwrights referred to female offspring as "odious daughters."

When I read the above statement, it made me appreciate the Gospel stories of Jesus interacting with women all the more. Despite the fact that they were considered nobodies by society Jesus treats them all with respect.

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December 15, 2019

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First Revolution: The Individual (Continued)

In Rome, a child did not achieve personhood until he was recognized by the head of the family, the father. When the mother had given birth, a midwife placed the child on the floor and summon the father into the room. He examined the child with his criteria of selection in mind.

Was the child his? If a man suspected his wife of adultery, he might reject the child without so much as a glance.

If the child was in "odious daughter," he would likely turn on his heel and leave the room.

If the child was "defective" in any way, he would do the same. Remember Seneca's adage: "what is good must be set apart from what is good for nothing."

Life or death? It all dependent on the will of a man human life began when the child was accepted into society a man did not "have a child." He "took a child." The father "raised up" the child by picking the child up off the floor.

The nonpersons who were left on the floor -- while their mothers watch from birthing chairs -- would be drowned immediately in a bucket of water were brought to the town dump to be exposed to wild dogs and vultures. And they survived for any considerable time, they might be rescued by pimps and raised his child prostitutes. With all legal and aboveboard. It was the right thing to do, as any reasonable and well-adjusted pagan philosopher would tell you.

When I read the above passage from the book the song lyric "and He will raise you up!" kept coming to mind and now has new meaning for meaning. I also began to think about how evil human beings can be when we judge others based on what their usefulness to us.

In Roman culture of the time of the early church, the father had absolute control over every member of his family -- including power over life and death. Under the Roman Republic. A paterfamilias -- the head of household -- could legally execute his son to be thought that the son deserved it. And the father alone determined whether the son deserved. Christian teaching held a human life is sacred. The fact that God had created each individual meant that the father's power was not absolute. "Honor your father and your mother, yes (and even those words "and your mother" were an assault on Roman family values), but "you shall not kill" above all.

I am so glad that my dad did not have a right to kill me when I was younger.

"You shall not kill" was an idea that had to be explained to educated Romans, who had no notion that human life was sacred just because it was human. Refuting (because the Romans knew they simply had to be up to something), St. Athenagoras explained that Christians could never be murderers because they refused even to kill an unborn child. They refuse to watch the gladiatorial games because they thought that enjoying watching gladiators being murdered was the same as participating in the murdering themselves.

The changes that Christians did to society happened through their example and not through their arguments and force. In much the same way today, we are called to change the world by having people see our example and want to follow it.

In a world that tolerated only the useful, Christians demanded protection for the most vulnerable and “useless” persons. The early Christians created the first truly tolerant, welcoming, and all-inclusive society – with a remarkable social welfare system, even from the very beginning.

We Catholics should be proud of the work that we do to make the world a better place. Catholic Charities for example is the greatest relief service program in the world.

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December 22, 2019

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Second Revolution: The Home

Love is seldom part of the vocabulary when pagans talk about the family. They speak of duty but not of love. The pagan family was the smallest unit of the state, and it was really more a form of government the relationship of love. Catholics speak of marriage a Covenant and not a contract. A Covenant is a ritual blessed by God that creates a kinship (a bond). A contract however is where two people come together and agree to exchange goods. Covenants cannot be undone but contracts can elapse or be reneged on. The Church says that the family is also a “domestic Church” and not a small state.

For Christians, God himself as a loving family. The father loves the son; the son is obedient to the father out of love. The love shared by the father and the son is the Holy Spirit. The pagan gods had families, too. But we certainly don't look for love and their relationships.

The word that Christians used to describe the inner-working of the Trinity is “Kenosis”. The word Kenosis means “pouring out.” The Father pours himself out into the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Son pours himself out into the Father and the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit pours himself out into the Father and the Son. They hold nothing back. There is no selfishness found in the Blessed Trinity. The families of the pagan gods were all about selfishness. We model our families after God and the pagans model gods after our families.

Common vases, lamps, and jewelry were festooned with the most shockingly obscene images. The walls of Pompeii – their lurid details preserved by the ashes from the Vesuvius – show us that those little household objects were the tip of the iceberg. The decorations in the homes of the middle class were little different what can be found in the common rooms of the brothels. Often the images received from pagan mythology, the amorous adventures of God's and demigods; they were both pornographic and religious at the same time.

Pornography always encourages us to look at other people as objects and not as individuals. It encourages us value people based on what they could do for us. When we value some people that way, we are more likely to begin to value other people in the same way and people will begin to assume that you value them based on what they can do for them.

With limitless leisure time and no supervision, teenage boys roam the streets in gangs. They pass time and mischief, random sexual activities, and, now and then, raping a prostitute. The prostitute was a girl, she might have been in a brothel because she had been rescued from a dunghill when she was a baby. (Christians and pimps were the only people likely to rescue an abandoned girl, though they did so with very different motivations.) She might be very young, because having invested in feeding and caring for her, the pimp would want to start making a profit as soon as possible.

Christians once again through action saved life and promoted dignity of all people. Christians treated everyone with respect even when others did not.

Meanwhile, the girls who did grow up at home – and by the end of the first century A.D., they were in short supply were married off very young. Custom dictated that the girl's father had to pay a substantial, sometimes ruinous, dowry to the groom for taking her off his hands. Girl suffered misery on two fronts: the groom was very often interested in the money his bride would bring with her then and the bride herself; and the father to think of his daughter only in terms of the Fortune she was costing him.

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December 29, 2019

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In times of prosperity, people looked at the fines and decided that they could afford them there were lifestyle expenses. Various emperors after Augustus tried to encourage childbearing through legislation but their efforts uniformly failed. Rome could not require spouses to trust each other. Rome cannot require a person to defer gratification of any desire for the sake of another person. Rome cannot impose a requirement for citizens to transcend their petty desires for the sake of the common good.

Kimberly Hahn, the wife of Scott Hahn, in her book: *Life Giving Love* writes the following:

In 1930, the Anglican's Lambeth Conference in England became the first official Christian body to approve the use of contraception in the most severe cases. In response, a Jesuit, Fr. David Lord, wrote the following analysis.

1. Birth control destroys the difference between prostitutes and respectable women by eliminating the ideal of motherhood and substituting the ideal of personal pleasure and self-gratification.
2. Birth control leads to infidelity by destroying self-restraint and self-discipline. For unmarried folk it banishes fear of consequences.
3. Birth control prevents noble faculty by refusal to co-operate with God in creation of children and substitutes for it, pleasure.
4. Birth control affects the future. Substituting self-gratification for children, (those using it) strike at the very source of human life.

The Imperial government in Rome, for all his marvelous achievements – which included clean water, the rule of law, and the suppression of piracy – cannot compile its citizens to trust in the future. Lacking that hope Romans didn't want children, and so they didn't have them – or at least they didn't raise them. Instead, they for their effort into the pursuit of pleasure.

Children should never be rejected because of how they might impact a person's wealth or social status.

Clement of Alexandria I observed that the same people who killed their newborns nevertheless lavished attention and money on their pets. "They expose children that are born at home, and take up the hatchlings of birds, and refer irrational to rational creatures." The wealthy who put their children out with the trash sometimes buried their dogs and cats and elaborate tombs.

I love my dog Hope, but I know there is a big difference between her and one of my nieces or nephews. We also know that there are some people who act like the ancient Romans with their pets and this should scare us.

The fundamental family relationship in Rome was the relationship of owner to property. Yet Paul tells husbands to be ready to die for their wives, steeped in Roman family values, this little better than nonsense. You might love your

wife, but die for her? You my love your chariot, but it would make no sense to die for it. If you die, your chariot would be of no use to you.

Give new meaning to St. Paul's writings.

Here is the difference between a pagan wedding in a Christian one. The pagan wedding the celebration of the pleasure the husband is about to get out of his bride (who, as we said earlier, it expected not to like it). The Christian wedding is a sacrament, a union of two souls, and earthly image that mirrors the love of Christ for his Church and the love of the three persons of the Trinity. Neither spouse is acquiring property; both are coming together to form an indissoluble union.

Marriage in the Catholic Church is the creation of a new family bond of equal partners so that each partner may help the other (and any children) to reach heaven. All the Church's teaching on sex and marriage come down to do things that will honor and respect your spouse and avoid things that will make you treat your spouse as an object.