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"Evangelization and the Culture of Death"

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5

Evangelization and the Culture of Death

Peter Casarella

In this essay I will explore the challenges presented to the spreading of the gospel that Pope John Paul II calls a culture of death. In doing so, I would like to avoid altogether the Manichaeanism that sometimes accompanies invocations of a culture of death and a “culture of life.” To confront the many faces of death in our culture with the one Word that truly gives life need not be based upon the specter of unending cosmic conflict between good and evil. A more hopeful yet equally realistic approach is needed.

Evangelization never takes place in a cultural vacuum. Only by testing the soil in which the seeds of the Word are planted can one be confident that the emerging shoots will be properly nurtured. When we discover that requisite nutriments are lacking, we have to inquire into what is needed for life to prosper. As John Paul II admirably illustrates, to understand the “culture of death” one must also be able to pose (and answer) basic questions about the meaning of death itself. Asking fundamental philosophical questions about the meaning of life and death is obviously not the province of Catholics alone, but it is a necessary condition for understanding the culture of death. Apart from the issue of euthanasia,
not much attention has been paid to the connection between the culture of death and death itself. This seems to be due to the way our culture engenders attitudes toward death that obscure the reality of death.

There is another reason for looking at the relationship between evangelization and the culture of death, one which issues from ambiguities about the nature and purpose of evangelization. Clarifying the challenges that the culture of death poses to the task of spreading the Gospel casts in relief the eucharistic form of evangelization. To see the basic form of evangelization as eucharistic is to comprehend evangelization as the offering of the incarnate God’s love. Without ever looking away from the particularly identity of Jesus of Nazareth, an inculturation and transformation of society based upon a eucharistic evangelization looks to the sacramental Presence of the Son of God as a self-emptying action for all others. Eucharistic evangelization offers no facile solutions to overcoming the impediments that a culture of death places in the way of the gospel of life. Only those such as the saints who have conformed their whole lives to the gospel’s model of self-giving love can do that. But a eucharistic evangelization—it will be argued—can at least offer in a concrete and practicable manner the basic contours of what is to be communicated.

The first part of this essay examines the meaning of the term culture of death in some writings of Pope John Paul II. The second part raises fundamental questions about the meaning of our deaths in a “culture of death.” The third part offers an interpretation of death based upon the experience of Christ’s love in the Eucharist. The essay includes with some reflections about the viability of a eucharistic evangelization in a culture of death.

The Culture of Death

The culture of death stands as a threat to the gospel of life even before the gospel is preached, taught, or lived, for the culture of death constricts our understanding of the human as much as of the divine. At the root of this disintegration is what Pope John Paul II calls “a certain Promethean attitude which leads people to think that they can control life and death by taking decisions about them into their own hands” (Evangelium vitae, n. 15). The basic, almost cataclysmic opposition between a culture of death and a culture of life forms an Ariadne’s thread in the pope’s encyclical. The culture of death brandishes the illusory promise of complete, technological control over the origin and end of human life. The forces in our society that encourage the culture of death create and consolidate “actual ‘structures of sin’ which go against life” (ibid., n. 24).

What is meant in the encyclical by the term “culture of death”? The Holy Father is referring to more than attitudes toward death itself. The culture of death is likewise a cultural attitude more deep-rooted than public support for abortion and euthanasia. While the Holy Father does identify “an objective conspiracy against life” in the world today, and even likens international organizations that market artificial contraception, sterilization, and abortion in underdeveloped countries to the Pharaohs of old, his more fundamental opposition to the culture of death is, I think, fourfold (cf. ibid., n. 16).
First, the culture of death denies that human freedom possesses an inherent and God-given relational dimension (ibid., n. 18). John Paul II equates the burgeoning culture of death with "the emergence of a culture which denies solidarity" and especially solidarity with innocent victims who have been "rejected, marginalized, uprooted and oppressed" by society (Evangelium vitae, nn. 12, 18). In a highly instructive passage, he analyzes the modern notion that personhood consists of enjoying "full or at least incipient autonomy" and emergence from a "state of total dependence on others" (ibid., n. 19). He considers and rejects the view that personal dignity rests ultimately upon "the capacity for verbal and explicit, or at least perceptible, communication" (ibid.). This view, he contends, would not protect the rights of the unborn or the dying, who are generally not capable of speaking up for themselves. Instead the Holy Father points to "the silent language of a profound sharing of affection" that lies at the heart of basic human dignity (ibid.). In other words, the modern project of eliminating all external constraints upon human freedom must be reinterpreted in light of the essential and profound capacity for interpersonal communion that lies at the very origin of human existence. Even an unborn infant can express loudly "the silent language" of sharing. The primordial capacity for interpersonal communion can later evolve into a genuine sense of human solidarity, an openness to others and a service for others.

The term "solidarity" in this context means more than just social and political togetherness. Solidarity defends the rights of the poor and oppressed to live with greater dignity, but it also signifies the potentiality of a human being to share in the life of another person. The culture of death safeguards individual freedom at the expense of a real communion of persons. With its highly individualistic conception of human freedom, the culture of death myopically equates altruism and human compassion with the complete absence of constraint upon the liberty of the individual. In doing so, this false notion of freedom is used to legitimate the oppression and even destruction of those who have no voice to resist.

Second, the culture of death reduces human existence to a merely biological function. The culture of death obscures "the mysterious difference" between ourselves and other creatures (cf. ibid., n. 22). Humanity itself is degraded to the level of a biological species. We regard ourselves as things, and we consider our lives possessions that we can manipulate and control with complete freedom. Existence consists of "programming, controlling and dominating birth and death." The values of being are replaced by those of having (ibid., n. 23). Technical reason narrows our access to human nature and even nature itself. The sense that existence is a sacred and venerable gift is screened out by materialistic values and a desire to make human life conform to a model of efficient production. The Holy Father's critique of the reduction of human rationality to technical manipulation comes very close to that of Martin Heidegger, who also saw modern technology as a cipher for modernity's will to power.4

The third effect of the culture of death, which in fact coincides with the second, is the eclipse of humanity's sense of transcendence, particularly the notion of God
as the God of life. Modern secular culture tests Christian communities by calling into question both man’s transcendent nature and the intrinsic, spiritual dignity of each and every human person (cf. ibid., n. 21). Robbing humanity of transcendence means taking away the sacredness of human life, namely, the giftedness of life itself. Even groups that adamantly proclaim the “right to life” are liable to lose sight of the giftedness of life if they do not perceive that the donation of life is the essential definition of God. Quoting Dionysius the Areopagite, the Holy Father explains how human life proceeds from divine life:

We must celebrate Eternal Life, from which every other life proceeds. From this, in proportion to its capacities, every being which in any way participates in life, receives life. This Divine Life, which is above every other life, gives and preserves life. Every life and every living movement proceeds from this Life which transcends all life and every principle of life. (Ibid., n. 84, citing Dionysius the Areopagite’s *On the Divine Names*, VI, 1: PG 3, 856 AB.)

God is not just one life writ large hovering above human lives. God himself is eternal life. Every living moment proceeds from the God who is life. His overflowing love for life converts us and calls us back to life even when we are tempted by the culture of death. The culture of death destroys the sense of a fully transcendent source of life present in and above all that is alive in the world. If God is the eternal life who gives and preserves life, then taking away the transcendent source of life is identical to taking away life itself.

Fourth, the culture of death distorts the meaning of human suffering. It has been widely publicized that the Holy Father, himself the object of an assassin’s rage, is fascinated by the question of suffering. Too often the media slights his profound understanding of human suffering as a personal or cultural bias. Insinuations are made that he wants to foster a cult of followers more enchanted with his own heroism than attentive to the real suffering that goes on in the world. In fact, Pope John Paul II maintains that the proper Christian attitude toward suffering is anything but heroic. He does maintain that our current cultural climate:

fails to perceive any meaning or value in suffering, but rather considers suffering the epitome of evil, to be eliminated at all costs. This is especially the case in the absence of a religious outlook which could help to provide a positive understanding of the mystery of suffering. (Ibid., n. 15.)

When society looks at the elderly and those who are sick simply in terms of how to ameliorate their physical pain in the most efficient manner possible, then those who are weakest become a barely tolerable burden (ibid., n. 64). A more biblical view of human suffering reveres the dignity and wisdom that accompanies old age and accentuates our freedom to participate in the passion of the Lord (ibid., n. 46). Suffering is neither a curse to be avoided altogether nor an opportunity for virile self-abnegation. But by being open to the inevitability of suffering in human life, we are more likely to recognize that we are not the masters of life and death. Entrusting
ourselves to the God of life in the face of death is a quiet, lifelong task, not just one that arises in heroic circumstances.

How do we as Christians respond to the culture of death? In spite of the presence of real social and personal fragmentation, fatalism is not a valid response. Fatalism only reinforces society’s banalization of death and blatant disregard for the dignity of human life. The Holy Father admonishes repeatedly in the *Gospel of Life* not to lose hope, for “we are the people of life and for life” (ibid., nn. 78, 83, 101, 105). A real transformation of our views toward death in a culture of death will require a practical response born of Christian hope. Evangelizing the culture of death entails a manifold response, one component of which is the de-privatizing, liturgical commemoration of the dead, especially the nameless dead and their witness to the truth. Another vital response is to initiate even now the process of healing the culture of death. Project Rachel, a post-abortion healing and reconciliation ministry, initiated in the Catholic Church in America, is an exemplary model of how the Church can respond in word and sacrament to the culture of death.⁶

*Our Deaths and the Culture of Death*

Pope John Paul II interprets “culture of death” in terms of a moral and spiritual crisis which confronts late modern Western culture. Taken in a narrower, more literal sense, a culture of death would be any culture intensely aware of death and its destructive power. Evidence for a culture of death in this second sense abounds in the world in which we live. Seemingly random violence tears apart the very fabric of American cities. Innumerable nameless victims of famine are buried each day in the third world. Bosnia remains a land of acute ethnic hatred. The blights of abortion, euthanasia, and physician-assisted suicide are defended in our own country. A recent editorial in a local Catholic newspaper poignantly recalls: “If guns are the weapons of destruction against our youth, it’s abortion that’s the weapon of destruction against the unborn. It’s pointless to weigh the importance of death on any one level. We must protect the lives of our children and adults at all stages.”⁷

We appear to be more aware of death than any previous generation. But the effect of constant bombardment by the mass media with images of anonymous deaths is ambiguous. Each time we are confronted with these images, our consciousness of the culture of death is slowly numbed. Repeated exposure dulls the impact of each new image and enables us to lose sight of the absurd character of mass deaths.⁸

A widespread awareness of death’s presence and power is hardly unique to the twentieth century. Former ages experienced plagues and waves of human destruction that appeared to be just as devastating. The experience of death at the end of the twentieth century nonetheless appears to have a distinctive character all its own. Our culture of death proliferates graphic images of death in the public domain and, paradoxically, sequesters the reality of death into a private domain. Recent sociological research points to the privatization of death as a distinctive feature of our culture:

Death has gradually been removed from public space, where it was contained in communal, reli-
religious beliefs and practices, into the seclusion of the hospital, where it has become a technical matter for medical professionals.\(^9\)

In other words, the faces of the dead appear to us more frequently and with greater accessibility than ever before, yet the meaning of death has by the same token become more obscure than ever before.

Even in the most closely-knit communities we can no longer speak of our experience of death as woven into the social fabric of life. The funeral rite today has the double duty not only of ritualizing grief but also of fabricating a common web of beliefs out of which the rites can be interpreted. Inevitably, participants arrive at the last moment from disparate corners of the globe. Priests presiding at Catholic funerals must explain the rubrics of the Mass to the uninitiated (including the lapsed Catholics) during the ceremony. Rituals are meant to bestow meaning on the phenomenon of death. Yet the meaning of the rituals can no longer be taken for granted in the manner of wheat in the harvest season. They become inexorably our rituals, our interpretations of how our communities have chosen to create a self-enclosed world of meaning out of an unspoken human eventuality.

It is no wonder that death appears to many of our contemporaries as the most banal of human experiences.\(^10\) Primitive cultures manifested a more realistic attitude toward death. Public rites on the behalf of the dead not only served as a visible reminder of death but also publicly proclaimed what everyone knew to be true about the shortness of life. Our culture, on the other hand, has a tendency to view death as a predominantly technological phenomenon.\(^11\) The sequestration of death from real social life into a highly sanitized realm goes hand in hand with the medical ideal of prolonging human life. The idea that modern science can continue to extend human life indefinitely is laughable. Efforts to live over a hundred years would not result in greater human happiness but only boredom and the even more terrifying possibility of being damned to a life robbed of meaning by its seeming endlessness.\(^12\)

The sociologist Peter Berger once maintained that in the last resort every human society consists of people banded together in the face of death.\(^13\) While Berger’s thesis is no doubt correct, there is a curious sense in which the prevalence of death across cultures contributes to its impersonality. Participating in the solemnity of a funeral rite, it is difficult to imagine oneself in the shoes of the deceased. How is this death related to my death? The most salient feature of the experience of attending a funeral, I think, is the fact that it is someone else and not myself who is being buried.

Can we grasp the meaning of our own death? This question is more difficult to answer than may first seem to be the case. The philosopher Martin Heidegger claimed that my death is the one possibility for my existence which is most my own.\(^14\) No action against my person is more personal than an action that involves the taking of my own life. When I die, I am not just undertaking an action that many who have gone before me have already completed. Regardless of external circumstances, my death will be my own. No one can perform this action for me.
Behind this truism lies a deeper philosophical question: "How do I enter into my own death?" Since at least Plato's *Phaedo* philosophers have presented arguments dealing with this question. Plato's dialogue is in fact not so much a catalogue of arguments as it is a conversation.\(^{15}\) In the midst of this conversation, one of the things that Socrates' interlocutors learn is that whenever a soul possesses a body it always brings life with it.\(^{16}\) The human soul, Socrates continues, will never admit the opposite of that which accompanies it, and death is the opposite of life. Since immortality is the name we apply to the condition of that which does not admit death, the soul is therefore immortal.

If one assumes that Plato was interested in proving the existence of an eternal place into which the soul passes after the moment of death, then Socrates' argument is less than fully compelling. Viewed strictly in terms of the logic of what was said, the natural opposition between life and death presented by Socrates need not be resolved by the acceptance of some extra-worldly reality existing apart from this life. In fact, it is not unreasonable to see this opposition as an antinomy of reason postulated by the human mind (Kant) or as a spiritual pedagogy that the Socratic questioner must undergo to rise above the physical pain of impending death (Stoic *apatheia*).

The question of how I enter into my own death requires a different kind of response than a proof in the strictest sense. Yet the Socratic insight into the natural opposition between life and death need not be ruled out of the court of reason altogether. The tendency of a culture of death is to create a false antinomy so that one must choose either merely biological existence or an illusory, fable-like immortality. The very fact that we can pose questions about life beyond death and seek an answer more substantial than mere opinion already begins to dissolve the separation of biological life and participation in eternity. Reflective thought resists the idea that life can be understood as a mere biological datum.

Inasmuch as human life manifests a capacity for truth that surpasses biological existence, Josef Pieper argues, one has already postulated the indestructibility of the human soul.\(^{17}\) According to Pieper, even though our knowledge of the truth is not unaffected by material causes and can easily be distorted by ideological influences, what we know to be true is not by nature material. If the mind is capable of an act that by its essence goes beyond every conceivable material concatenation and remains independent of it, then it must also have an *esse absolutum*. It must possess a being independent of the body. It must be an entity that persists through the dissolution of the body and beyond death.

Can I actually experience my soul as indestructible? Even a compelling proof that the soul does not perish does not yield information about what the state of life after death will be like. A proof based upon man's capacity for the truth such as Pieper's still leaves us in learned ignorance about the state of the departed soul. For persons of faith the point of the proof is not to ground Christian anthropology in an otherworldly abstraction ("immortality") but to acknowledge natural reason's capacity to confirm the biblical picture of the God of life who truly gives and shares his being with his creatures.\(^{18}\)
Pieper’s argument about the indestructibility of the soul shows that if the Christian message of eternal life is true, then it must be true universally. It does not, however, provide a very practicable solution to the problem of how to evangelize the culture of death. The final section of the essay will turn to the experience of God’s eternal life in the Eucharist. Here we find an answer to the question of how I enter into my own death—an answer as vital today as it was in the earliest apostolic communities.

Our Death and the Eucharist

Surprisingly, recent Catholic theology has paid scant attention to the connection between our death and the Eucharist. I would like to offer a few comments on why the paschal mystery celebrated in the Eucharist can support efforts to evangelize a culture of death. This insight is not ignored by Pope John Paul II:

Precisely by contemplating the precious blood of Christ, the sign of his self-giving love (cf. John 13:1), the believer learns to recognize and appreciate the almost divine dignity of every human being. . . .

Precisely because it is poured out as the gift of life, the blood of Christ is no longer a sign of death, of definitive separation from the brethren, but the instrument of a communion which is richness of life for all. . . .

It is from the blood of Christ that all draw the strength to commit themselves to promoting life. It is precisely this blood that is the most powerful source of hope, indeed it is the foundation of the absolute certitude that in God’s plan life will be victorious. (Evangelium vitae, n. 25.)

The Eucharist is at once a recognition of the uniqueness of Christ’s offering of self for the sake of our salvation and memorializing, participatory praise. When the immeasurable love for humanity poured out on the cross is seen, all human life is viewed with renewed dignity. This encounter (and being encountered) breaks the shackles of a merely biological understanding of death. The blood poured out by Christ for our sake promotes life and creates a solid, concrete hope for communion with God’s own life both now and in the future.

When the second century martyr Saint Ignatius of Antioch issued the plea “Let me be the imitator of the passion of my God,” he was thinking of how the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection will be reenacted and reproduced by the members of the Body of Christ. Ignatius’s writings testify to the close connection that many of the Fathers saw between the Eucharist and death, one that allowed him to describe the Eucharist as “the medicine of immortality, the antidote that results not in dying, but in living forever in Jesus Christ.”

More than a few passages in the rite of the Roman Mass suggest a similar connection. I will restrict myself among other things to representative selections from the Eucharistic prayers. They include, inter alia, the following exhortation with the proclamation of the mystery of faith: “When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus, until you come in glory.” The Latin phrase rendered by “we proclaim
your death” (mortem tuam annuntiamus) still expresses
the Pauline sense that our act of thanksgiving sends the
“Word of the cross” into the world as a message of
hope. Proclaiming Christ’s death stands at the center
of the Eucharist because the unadorned cross is the most
expressive symbol of God’s outpouring of love. The
memorial of Christ’s death is not just the recollection
of an exemplary way of life. God himself was crucified in
the flesh, and through this ultimate self-offering he
poured his love into the lowest depths of human misery.
The victimization of innocents in a culture of death is
not a condition unknown by the God who enters into
our suffering.

The nature of God’s suffering for us has been un-
derstood variously in the Christian tradition. Among
Catholics the proclaimed cross is not understood to be
wholly external to the believer, as a merely extrinsic
exchange of God’s righteousness for our wretchedness.
The Word of the cross is offered to us as a gift. Recep-
tivity is imperative but not in the sense of standing by as
passive observers. The wisdom proclaimed on our lips
corresponds to both an interior conversion of the heart
and an exterior conformity of action. In this sense,
becoming imitators of the passion of our God is a re-
sponse to a call to radical holiness.

The final clause of the proclamation (donec venias,
“until you come”) underscores the eschatological na-
ture of this hope. The Eucharist celebrates our vocation
to eternal life and draws into the living memory of the
Church “those who have gone before us marked with
the sign of faith . . . .”25 In “calling up the dead,” we
remember those who have perished and make this
memory a living part of the present and future. In the
life of the contemporary Church the “circumcision”
of the saints and victims of senseless violence fortifies
the spiritual communion of the faithful.26 Keeping this
memory alive forces us to face the absurdity of mass
death in our culture and gives us concrete examples of
how to live out Jesus’ call to discipleship. We call upon
the Lord to “share in the fellowship of [his] apostles
and martyrs” (Eucharistic Prayer [EP] I) so that we may
imitate witnesses to the faith who exemplified Christ’s
holiness, stood in solidarity with the poor and outcast,
and promoted life in a culture of death. The spiritual
communion of the living and the dead will be perfected
only with the future coming of God’s kingdom but has
already begun to make itself visible in the Church’s lit-
urgy.

With so much emphasis in saving us from “final
damnation” (EP I) and entering into our “heavenly in-
heritance” (EP IV), it may appear that the drama of sal-
vation enacted in the Eucharist takes place on a wholly
otherworldly stage. A one-sidedly otherworldly eucha-
ristic theology would make it difficult for the faithful to
find consolation in these passages and virtually unre-
asonable to ask those facing death to enter into the pas-
sion of our Lord. Yet the hope for salvation expressed
in the eucharistic prayers need not be interpreted in a one-
sided manner, for these prayers also shed light on death
as a human phenomenon.

There are three ways, I think, in which the prayers
of the Roman rite speak to the human experience of
death. By human experience of death, I do not mean
that the Eucharist presents death as a merely human prob-
lem but that the opposition between mere death and an offer of eternal life is viewed in terms of tangible human experiences. First, the Eucharistic Prayers represent Christ’s human suffering unto death and do so in a very vivid way:

We recall his passion . . . (EP I.)
For our sake he opened up his arms on the cross. (EP II.)
Father, calling to mind the death your Son endured for our salvation . . . Look with favor in your Church’s offering and see the Victim whose death has reconciled us to yourself. (EP III.)
In fulfillment of your will he gave himself up to death, . . . We recall Christ’s death, his descent among the dead. (EP IV.)

All of these passages recall and bid us to enter into the human passion of Christ. The Council of Trent famously defined the distinction between the death on the cross and the sacrifice of the Mass in terms of the difference between a “bloody” and “unbloody” propitiation. Without rejecting the real presence of a Eucharistic Sacrifice in the Mass, it may be more helpful today to look at the whole human act of obedience memorialized in the Eucharistic Prayers. The “death he freely accepted” (EP II) and the open embrace of his arms on the cross point to Jesus’ exercise of real human self-determination in the face of death. He chose in a fully human manner to respond with obedience to the will of the Father. The fourth Eucharistic Prayer even adds that his free decision to enter into death extends to the point of entering into solidarity with the dead souls in Sheol. A more total acceptance of human solitude and abandonment than this is not conceivable. The liturgy recalls that Jesus faced death and freely accepted the full lowliness of the human condition. From the depths of this absolute self-emptying, we see the message of the cross transformed from a proclamation of death into the good news of life.

Second, the Word of the cross conquers death even now. The rite of blessing and sprinkling holy water at the beginning of Mass speaks of “saving us from all illness and the power of evil.” The private preparation of the priest before communion includes the words: “Lord Jesus Christ, with faith in your love and mercy I eat your body and drink your blood. Let it not bring me condemnation, but health in mind and body.” The liturgy speaks repeatedly of a cleansing from sin, the bringing of life into the world, and of God’s action helping all men to seek and find him (cf. EP IV).

A eucharistic evangelization will accordingly have to emphasize the healing power of God’s presence. When Saint Ignatius of Antioch spoke of the Eucharist as the “medicine of immortality,” he was not thinking of the “saving cup” as a magic potion. The liberation “from the corruption of sin and death” mentioned in the fourth eucharistic prayer requires both an individual examination of conscience and the active transformation of society’s “structures of sin” into communities and institutions that promote life (cf. Evangelium vitae, n. 24).

Third, the hope that grows from the human response to the paschal mystery is one that does not rule out the possibility of universal salvation: “you did not abandon
him to the power of death (in imperio mortis), but helped all men to seek and find you.” The eucharistic prayer does not deny that the threat of being eternally abandoned to the reign of death (imperium mortis) stands before each one of us as a real possibility; however, the scope of God’s action on behalf of humanity is nonetheless depicted as universal (cf. 1 Tm 2:4). Because of the unique power of Christ’s death to renew all life, no one must remain abandoned to death’s reign. The victory of the kingdom of God over the reign of death was a central element of apostolic preaching to the early Christian community at Corinth. According to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, death is literally “swallowed up” by life.29

The call to hope for universal salvation in the Eucharist is an essential, though disputed, part of the gospel’s message. It points to the social dimension of Christian faith even here in this world, for it implies that all who can respond positively to the presence of God’s incarnate love in the world will be transformed by his far-reaching embrace. The hope for corporate salvation radically de-privatizes the experience of death in our culture. If we truly believe that all the departed may enter into the light of God’s presence, then death is no longer a shocking reality that must be hidden from the public view. Our liturgies should accordingly call to mind the hidden victims of first world abortions, famine in Africa, drive-by shootings in our inner cities, and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia precisely because the Eucharist enjoins us to bring all anonymous outcasts into the intensely personal communion created by Christ’s self-offering of love.

How, concretely, can the eucharistic experience of our deaths contribute to the task of evangelization? The proximate goal of a eucharistic evangelization is to proclaim the universal, healing power of Christ’s act of self-giving love to a world broken by sin and masked with the manifold faces of death. The Eucharist is the best model for evangelization precisely because we see more concretely here than elsewhere that Christ is the doer and the giver; only when he has given me what is his, when I am really and actually bound to him and then open myself to him, does that marvelous exchange take place which is the only way to salvation.30

Evangelization in a culture of death will not succeed if it is based upon anything less than complete receptivity to God’s love. The culture of death narrows the scope of our view of both death and life. The culture of death cuts life and death down to merely human problems. Solutions which on a human level seem very effective (e.g., relieving victims of chronic illnesses of their intense pain through a physician-assisted suicide) obscure God’s beckoning us into his presence with an offer of eternal life.

Finally, a eucharistic evangelization must acknowledge that we cannot respond to God’s love on our own. We need concrete models to follow. The Holy Father concludes Evangelium vitae with an encomium to how Mary serves as “the incomparable model of how life should be welcomed and cared for” (n. 102). Saints and martyrs such as Ignatius of Antioch, Teresa of Avila, and Archbishop Oscar Romero followed the radical chal-
lence of the gospel of life in a truly eucharistic fashion. Through their imitation of Christ, they showed how Christians can live the entirety of their lives as *eucharistia* (thanksgiving) to the Father. The concrete examples of these holy women and men (or even other less well-known witnesses to Christ’s model of self-giving love) are the best resources the Church possesses today for proclaiming a victory over the culture of death.

**Conclusion**

In this essay I have drawn out some of the implications of the Holy Father’s characterization of our culture as a culture of death and shown how it could help us to understand our own deaths. By drawing upon sociological and philosophical analyses, I approached the phenomenon of death as it might actually appear to the believer in the culture of death. This approach will, I hope, shed greater light upon the many ethical questions associated with death and dying. Crucial distinctions such as the one between forgoing extraordinary means and active euthanasia are obviously still needed in those cases in which modern medicine leaves great ambiguity about what actually constitutes death (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, n. 65). Alongside proper distinctions, however, a Christian theologian also needs to articulate the basic vision that allows persons of faith to justify the claim that one ought never to aim at death as either an end or a means. With this in mind, I looked at how the experience of Christ’s love in the Eucharist could contribute to evangelizing a culture of death.

I do not believe that there is a single recipe for evangelizing the culture of death. The tendency today to utilize more sophisticated media networks or adopt state of the art communication techniques yields, in my opinion, questionable results. People today need to be brought in touch with the piercing reality of God’s love through a face to face encounter. Taking the eucharistic experience as the key will help those who evangelize to communicate more effectively the true glory of being called by the God of life.

**ENDNOTES**


3 Space does not permit a consideration of the ecological thought of John Paul II, in which the divinely bestowed lordship of humanity over the other creatures is interpreted in terms of the distinctiveness of human spousal love rather than possession, control, and exploitation (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, n. 43).


5 On Pope John Paul II’s profound understanding of the mystery of suffering see his “Apostolic Letter on the Christian Meaning of Suffering” (*Salvifici doloris*).
can draw us out of the waters by his power and hold us firm. Only he can make us stand up straight on the breakers of the sea of mortality.”

19 Cf. also Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 20 and his apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris*, n. 24.


22 The rite of blessing and sprinkling holy water is especially evocative, for it renews the baptismal promise that the water of eternal life will “save us from all illness.”


24 The Holy Father points out the “close link” between Eucharist and Penance in *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 20.


26 Cf. David N. Power, “Calling up the Dead,” *The Spectre of Mass Death*, pp. 111–120.

27 Thirteenth session, ch. 2. DS 1743.

28 EP IV. Cf. EP IV: “The acceptable sacrifice which brings salvation to the whole world”, the private preparation of the priest before communion: “Your death brought life to the world”; and EP II: “Remember our brothers and sisters who have gone to their rest in the hope of rising again; bring them and all the departed into the light of your presence” (emphasis added).

