On the desk in front of me are three artifacts from the modern world: a suicide note, a letter, and a book. Allow me to introduce each one:

The suicide note is from 2007. It reads as follows: “I’m so sorry for what I’ve put you through. …I just can’t be a burden to you and my friends any longer. You are all better off without me. …I’ve just snapped. I can’t take this meaningless existence anymore. I’ve been a constant disappointment and that trend would have only continued. …I love you mommy. I love you dad. …P.S. I’m really sorry.”[1] Nineteen-year-old Robert Hawkins then went to the Westroads Mall in Omaha, Nebraska, with a rifle. He shot eight people before killing himself.

The letter I am holding is from 1881. It was written by Charles Darwin to William Graham, author of Creed of Science. In the letter, Darwin wrote: “with me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man’s mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one [sic] trust in the convictions of a monkey’s mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?”[2]

The book is from 2006. It was written by Barack Obama and is entitled The Audacity of Hope. In this book, President Obama contrasts politics, which is based on compromise, with religion, which does not allow for compromise. He writes: “To base one’s life on such uncompromising [religious] commitments may be sublime; to base our policy making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing.”[3]

Each of these artifacts illustrates one of three powerful tendencies of our modern age: nihilism, scientism, and statism. Nihilism involves the experience of meaninglessness; as in the case of Hawkins, it can lead to violence and self-destruction. Scientism attempts to replace religion by seeking to explain all of reality in terms of scientific methods alone. Scientism is driven by the hope that man can choose his own purposes and meanings;[4] and since it is based on a view of man as purely animal, it eventually undermines its own devotion to reason, a matter concerning which Darwin himself expressed doubt in this very letter. The third tendency of the modern world is “statism.” While Obama’s view of politics, which he sees as necessitating compromise, may be sound on many questions of governance, statism is a danger implicit in Obama’s separation of “uncompromising commitments” from politics. “Statism” is a word from political science referring to high levels of state involvement in the economy and society; I mean here to use the word not so much in this way as in an older sense of the word: “subservience to political expediency in religious matters” (Oxford English Dictionary, sense 2). While Obama rec-
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recognizes the importance of faith, there is a tendency in his approach to make the state itself the determiner of truth (while perhaps paying lip service to God). Statism challenges the claim that people can know and govern themselves according to true and unchanging principles. Politics thus regresses to the struggle for power waged on ideological fronts (be they of the Left or the Right).

The Second Vatican Council gave us the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes). This document filled the soil for the New Evangelization, equipping us with tools for the inevitable confrontation with nihilism, scientism, and statism. These tools, I argue, are three: (1) a new sense of confidence and a willingness to dialogue with the modern world, (2) a deep understanding of what it is to be human, and (3) a ‘cultural logic’ that helps us discern wisely between different courses of decision and action.

The first part of my argument concerns the style and attitude of Gaudium et spes. George Weigel writes in Witness to Hope that Archbishop Karol Wojtyła’s work on Gaudium et spes was his primary contribution to the Second Vatican Council.[5] Wojtyła thought it important to adopt an “ecumenical style” rather than a defensive style so as to signal openness to dialogue with the modern world.[6] Thus, the document addresses itself to the “whole of humanity.”[7] It proclaims that nothing “genuinely human fails to raise an echo” in Christian hearts.[8] The task of the Church is to scrutinize the “signs of the times” and to respond to the “perennial questions which men ask about this life and the life to come” using a language suited to each generation.[9] The document speaks of the Church not as opposed to the modern world but as being in the modern world. Christians share the hopes and sufferings of everyone.

The ecumenical style of the document was indeed new. It modeled an approach for Catholics that remains important today. In the first part of the nineteenth century, the Church was far less open on this front, having suffered severe attacks on its intellectual integrity and on its political freedom during the Enlightenment, amidst the French Revolution, and under Napoleon (who, I might add, had kidnapped two popes). In response to such injustices, nineteenth-century Church documents tended to be quite severe in their condemnation of the modern world. For example, in 1864 Pius IX’s Syllabus of Errors (paragraph 80) proclaimed that it was an error to think that, “The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization.”[10] Even in the age of the famed Syllabus and all the stringency it legislated, there were others, such as John Henry Newman (1801-1890), who worked to bridge the modern world to Catholicism through dialogue. They did this by digging deep into Catholic tradition for intellectual resources that would enrich conversations ranging from freedom to the unity of Christian churches. Nevertheless, without the work of yet another two or three generations of Catholic theologians, the reality of Gaudium et spes would not have been possible.

By the 1960s, following the devastation of the Second World War and then the onset of the nuclear arms race, humanity was left to come to terms with its own “absolute contempt for man,” in Wojtyła’s words.[11] Wojtyła had witnessed man’s self-contempt in Nazism and Communism; neither was it absent from the liberal regimes of the West. The emphasis on the human person, which was a core concern of Gaudium et spes, also occupied a pivotal place in the pontificate of John Paul II. Here I am touching on the second part of my argument: that Gaudium et spes furthered the Church’s dialogue with the modern world precisely by talking about something that we are all concerned about, regardless of any stance on religion; namely, the importance of articulating what it is to be human. While many thought (and still argue) that religion is a barrier to understanding of the human person, Gaudium et spes claims just the opposite. The closer human beings come to God the closer they come to their own humanity and the truths of the world. This is the kind of truth that can be tested and verified in our own experience of the life of faith.[12] As Gaudium et spes puts it, “Christ…fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”[13] On this theological foundation, the Second Vatican Council prepared the way for the New Evangelization, enriching the potential of our language and what it can express about our humanity.

The 2007 killings and suicide – to say nothing of the drive to legalize physician-assisted suicide – remind us of the urgency to address the meaning of human life. They also indicate the inability of men and women to devise such meaning through their own devices. Tragically, Hawkins found in his “meaningless existence” the only meaning left to him, it seemed: the fame that would result from his shooting spree. He resorted to the violence so often associated with man-made idols. But those idols can never answer the deepest questions of the meaning and purpose of human existence. Gaudium et spes says that man “plunges into the depths of reality whenever he enters into his own heart; God, Who probes the heart, awaits him there; there he discerns his proper destiny beneath the eyes of God.”[14] In man’s heart, the document reads, the most basic questions arise: “what is man? What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress? …What follows this earthly life?”[15] In this way, Gaudium et spes summons Catholics to speak with modern people about fundamental questions of common concern: Why would God allow suffering and evil? What is human happiness and the meaning of life? From whom should we seek wisdom and in what does it consist? Are there as many truths as there are people, or is there a truth that beckons us all? These are the
questions of human life, in which the human being is a meaning-seeking animal unlike any other. These are the basic questions that should be the foundation of Catholic education and evangelization. By growing with others in the answers to these questions the light of Christ can enter the modern soul and the modern mind.

The third part of my argument concerns how *Gaudium et spes* prepares Catholics to engage culture. Culture is like a dinner table where the Church and the world can dialogue. What I call a ‘cultural logic’ is the manner in which – I would suggest – Catholics can speak at that dinner table with the world. *Gaudium et spes* includes an entire section on the importance that culture bears on the full development of the human person. It defines culture socio-historically as a people’s common way of life, such that one can speak of a ‘plurality of cultures’ in the world; it also defines culture in a humanistic and universal sense as everything by which people strive to improve themselves physically and spiritually.[16] “The Gospel of Christ constantly renews the life and culture of fallen man,” the document reads. The Church, “in the very fulfillment of her own function, stimulates and advances human and civic culture; by her action, also by her liturgy, she leads men toward interior liberty.”[17]

This focus on culture is a new departure for the Church’s engagement with the modern world. The socio-historic meaning of the word is the greatest contribution of anthropology to modern thought, but culture in this sense only came to prominence in the early twentieth century. Scholars such as Christopher Dawson and T. S. Eliot helped make it common parlance among English-speaking Christians during the 1930s to the 1950s. It was adopted by the Council to describe the ways of life of the modern world into which the Church sought to bring Christ. Ever since, the concept of culture has greatly shaped that evangelical mission. For example, the roots of the Pontifical Council for Culture date back to the Council.[18] The New Evangelization is geared toward evangelizing culture,[19] and the phrases “culture of death” and “culture of life” are routinely used by Catholics in thinking about the modern world. The term “culture” is central to post-Vatican II Catholicism thanks partly to *Gaudium et spes*.

The cultural logic implicit in *Gaudium et spes* is a way of thinking that springs from attention to the history of culture, Christian and pagan, as an object of knowledge. A cultural logic helps Catholics engage the modern world in three major ways. (1) It orients us toward the field of action. It is in the sphere of culture (domestic cultures, institutional cultures, entertainment cultures, civic cultures) that Catholics must witness Christ. The notion that such communities play a central role in ennobling the human person “is an extremely important contribution of *Gaudium et spes* both to the Catholic Church and to the whole world.”[20]

(2) Secondly, a cultural logic makes us aware of cultures, of cultural duality between Catholicism and the world. The tension in this duality shifts in different ages of the Church and is often fruitful. For example, the tradition of Christian culture has given the modern world universities, hospitals, great art, the preservation of classical literature, and humanitarian principles that have helped to uplift the downtrodden and end slavery. Catholicism has also gained much from traditions of the non-Christian world, including Greek philosophy, Roman administration and law, polyphony, Latin, use of the Internet, and the idea of “culture” itself.

The cultural duality of which I have been speaking also makes us aware of traditions in modern culture that clash with traditions in Christian culture. For example, liberal secularism is not the “neutral ground” it claims to be but has its own culture and traditions.[21] One of its traditions is to uphold the ideal of individual autonomy. This ideal, especially in the English-speaking world, has contributed to limited government, civil rights, and religious freedom. However, the ideal of individual autonomy can clash with a classical and Catholic view of the human person as social, bodily, and spiritual by nature. These clashes are seen especially in the areas of economic individualism, sex, abortion, euthanasia, conscience protection, and institutional autonomy. By learning to think in terms of culture as the place or dinner table where Church and world dialogue, Catholics can begin to ask questions of the world such as: What are the sources of your liberal tradition of individual autonomy? How have those sources shaped your idea of freedom? Catholics can also ask themselves: How is freedom understood from a Catholic perspective? What traditions of Christian culture in the past can help me spiritually and intellectually confront new developments within modern culture?

Recognizing those areas where there is a clash of traditions (Catholicism and liberalism, for example), injects discernment into our ecumenical dialogue with the modern world. This discernment leads us to recognize which traditions of the modern world can be redeemed and which are so entangled with evil and/or error that dialogue must give way to rigorous opposition. Such discernment takes wisdom, defined as sharing in the light of the divine mind by striving to see the whole picture of reality.[22]

(3) The third benefit of a cultural logic is that it gives Catholics deeper appreciation of the idea of tradition itself. For example, there are different traditions in the interpretation of Vatican II. The interpretation (or hermeneutic) of discontinuity views the Council as a totally new departure for the Church. The Council is seen as essentially an ideological power strug-
gle of traditionalist versus progressive. Cultural logic helps us to realize that the hermeneutic of discontinuity has a cultural history of its own. It can be traced to the Enlightenment, where the cultural legacy of preceding generations was repudiated in the name of “progress.” Pope Benedict XVI wrote that the hermeneutic of discontinuity is incompatible with how Catholics understand tradition. It is the hermeneutic of continuity, according to Pope Benedict, that properly interprets the Second Vatican Council. [23] This hermeneutic views the Council from within the tradition of Christian culture.

The idea of tradition implicit within the hermeneutic of continuity is able to reconcile past and present. It does this in the same way that a new and great piece of art is appreciated within the context of the whole tradition of art that came before it. This is the point T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) makes in his 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” What is new, he writes, is inserted into the existing tradition, which is whole and already complete in itself up to that point in time. Continuity is maintained between old and new because our perspective on the whole of the tradition is altered somewhat in response to the new interpretation or work of art. Thus conformity between old and new is maintained as our view of the whole tradition becomes richer.[24] This is the proper understanding – rather than revolutionary rupture – of the place of the Second Vatican Council within the whole of Catholic tradition.

In these three ways the cultural logic of Gaudium et spes orients Catholics toward the field of action, inculcates wise discernment, and views tradition as essential to creative engagement with modern culture. It now remains to apply the tools of Gaudium et spes of confident dialogue, deep understanding of the human person, and cultural logic to the problems of scientism and statism.

While the capacity for scientific investigation is one of the greatest endowments of mankind, it is limited to answering scientific questions. Lord Jonathan Sacks, a chief rabbi of Britain, points this out in his recent article “The Limits of Secularism.” Science cannot answer the deepest questions of human nature, such as, “Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live?” He writes that science, technology, the liberal democratic state, and the market economy are the four institutions that characterize modernity. While each of them can answer questions within their own ambit of investigation, none of them can answer deeply human questions. Science explains how, Sacks writes, but not why. Technology yields power, but offers no insight as to how we should use it. The modern state protects maximum freedom, but falls silent on its improper uses. The markets offer choices and enable us to increase our potential for wealth, but provide no indication as to what is right and just.[25]

When science tries to answer wisdom questions with scientific answers, it betrays its own requirements of precision and method by venturing into an area for which it is severely ill-equipped. The British evolutionary biologist and president of the Eugenics Society, Julian Huxley (1887-1975), was guilty of this mistake. In his 1964 essay “The New Divinity” (from Essays of a Humanist), he wrote, “There is no separate supernatural realm: all phenomena are part of one natural process of evolution. … I believe that [a] drastic reorganization of our pattern of religious thought is now becoming necessary, from a god-centered to an evolutionary-centered pattern.” Huxley took up a theological wisdom-based question (does God exist?) and failed to answer it except to deduce a belief about metaphysical reality on the basis of material reality. For all its scientific pretention, Huxley’s answer is rather unsuccessful, for it fails to answer a question based on wisdom by insisting wrongly that it be treated scientifically. By a gradual process, Huxley and his followers have bought into an ideology, the promotion of a pseudo-religion for those who hope there is no God. Huxley wrote in the same essay: “The sense of spiritual relief which comes from rejecting the idea of God as a superhuman being is enormous.”[26] This indicates, perhaps, one of the motives behind scientism.

Scientism commits the fallacy criticized by Gaudium et spes of “unduly transgressing the limits of the positive sciences, [and contending] that everything can be explained by this kind of scientific reasoning alone….“[27] The document continues: “today’s progress in science and technology can foster a certain exclusive emphasis on observable data and a kind of agnosticism about everything else. For the methods of investigation which these sciences use can be wrongly considered as the supreme rule of seeking the whole truth.”[28]

In opposition to scientism, Gaudium et spes defends true science. True science recognizes its difference from religion. Lord Sacks simplified the issue nicely when he said that science takes things apart to see how they work, while religion puts things together to see what they mean. [29] In this way they cannot conflict or collapse into each other. “For,” as Galileo wrote in his “Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina” (1615), “the Holy Scripture and nature derive equally from the Godhead….“[30]

In its discussion of culture Gaudium et spes reminds us that different objects of culture must be studied with different methods. It reminds us that one must view each discipline in light of the whole of reality.[31] The document recognized that there are two orders of knowledge called faith and reason. Each must use the proper methods in its own domain. This means that the “legitimate autonomy of human culture and especially of the sciences” was affirmed.[32] In this way, what I call the cultural logic of Gaudium et spes protects us from ap-
plying one method to everything because man and culture are of a dual nature.

Finally, what may be said regarding Gaudium et spes and statism? Statism results when the state refuses to be itself and strives to take on the functions of religion. This can happen by the use of ideologies idolizing free-market individualism and militarism, or it can happen by cutting off the state from first principles (purporting that they are “dangerous”) effectively making it a law unto itself. This leaves the state without limitations to define reality according to the one in power.

In response, the deep understanding of human nature and the cultural logic implied in Gaudium et spes directs our attention to the idea of the common good. Because human beings have a social nature and a spiritual destiny, indicated by the fundamental questions that they ask, culture needs a proper independence. Spiritual liberty within the culture must be maintained in order for the intermediary institutions of that culture to thrive. This independence is an integral part of the common good of a people, which the Church and the state must both safeguard. According to Gaudium et spes, the common good is the sum of conditions that make it possible for individuals, families, and institutions to obtain their own perfection.[33] That which is common is the good of people, and people are, by nature, body and soul. This is why humans can only achieve their true good by exercising their own spiritual and intellectual powers to improve themselves. It is also why big government is an impediment to realizing our fullest human potential. The principle of subsidiarity is fundamental to the common good.

Thus, political authority must be exercised within the limits of the moral order so as to respect the proper liberty needed for the full development of the person. Rather than make itself into a god by deciding what is good and evil, the state must protect the common good and recognize the true freedom of human culture within which Church and state operate in their independent and autonomous fields, though in cooperation with each other since they serve the same people. [34] In this way, the nature of man and the nature of culture provide limits to the state by pointing to things beyond its jurisdiction.

In conclusion, Gaudium et spes and the inauguration of the New Evangelization gives us a confident and ecumenical orientation toward the modern world. It supplies a robust understanding of human nature capable for responding to nihilism. Gaudium et spes also offers a cultural logic. Learning to think in terms of culture points the New Evangelization toward its proper field (culture) where Church and world can meet in a myriad of ways to their mutual benefit. Such a logic also helps us with wise discernment by awareness of cultural duality.

This discernment assists us to know at what point the dialogue has ended and when resistance to harmful cultural tendencies must begin. The cultural logic of Gaudium et spes aids the discovery of new things by thinking with tradition. And it un-masks the pretentions of scientism and statism by insisting on the true dignity and vocation of science and politics. ■

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ENDNOTES

[8] Ibid., § 1.
[9] Ibid., § 4.
[14] Ibid., § 14.
[15] Ibid., § 10.
[16] Ibid., § 53.
[17] Ibid., § 58.


[28] Ibid., § 57.


[32] Ibid., § 59.

[33] Ibid., § 74.

[34] Ibid., §§ 74, 76.