

THREE MEDITATIONS ON HUMAN FLOURISHING

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“I have come that they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly.”

(John 10:10)

Human well-being is characterized in a variety of ways. We speak of “self-actualization,” or “thriving,” or “doing very well indeed,” or being a “success,” or “having it all.” None of these rough-and-ready equivalents captures the richness of human flourishing.

What, then, does? And is the notion tied inextricably to Christian understanding? This second question I cannot begin to answer in the thematic considerations that follow. But, perhaps, through example and a philosophical and theological argument, I will be able to push our reflections on human flourishing in a manner that is helpful to our dialogue.

First Meditation: Abundance vs. “Having More”

In the context of a discussion of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, John 10:10 tells us that the thief comes to rob and to plunder, but Jesus, the Good Shepherd, has come that we might have life and might have it more abundantly. Because this passage follows fast upon a discussion of thievery, it is easy to interpret it as saying that God here gives a blessing—tacit though it may be—to the garnering of earthly riches. Having life more abundantly tells many of us that we are to enjoy the fruits of our labor and those of many others. In the United States those fruits are abundant indeed. To be sure, there are a few

(by comparison to the whole) stubborn pockets of poverty and want in our land. Good times are never shared equally by all. But that acknowledged, it is nevertheless the case that we are the richest society ever known.

For example, surveying data on daily caloric consumption, even for those in the lowest strata in our society, is instructive. No one is desperate for food in the sense that genuinely starving or malnourished people are; indeed, in every stratum we tend to eat too much. Those that “go hungry” are overwhelmingly implicated in various pathologies, most often drug and alcohol addiction or untreated mental illness—people who cannot “organize” themselves to feed themselves or others properly. The lack of food per se is not the problem.

Walking into an American supermarket is an experience one should never take for granted. The fruits of the earth are there in abundance—and then some. I paid a visit to our neighborhood Kroger’s about a mile from our home in Nashville. In the fresh fruits and vegetables section I found seventy-one varieties—seventy-one distinctive fruits and vegetables. The kings and queens of the past enjoyed nothing like this abundance, which has developed even within my own lifetime. I can remember the first fresh grapefruit I ever tasted at age nine. I recall my regret at cutting the last batch of leaf lettuce at the end of the growing season. That meant no more green salads until well into the following summer, for spring planting came late to the high plains of northern Colorado. Nowadays I no more notice the cornucopia spread before me at the local supermarket than I remark on the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. Variety and abundance of food have become normal, ordinary—just the way things are.

But is this the sort of abundance Scripture is talking about? At this point in such discussions one is often treated to a guilt trip concerning American abundance and good fortune. There is a form of criticism that borders on self-loathing, thereby courting the sin of pride. I refer to the spiritual pride of indulging in guilt and public breast-beating because one has never come close to starving, never been caught up in a brutal civil war, has every expectation of putting one's head on the pillow in the evening and rising to greet the morning safe and sound. At times it seems as though contemporary Christianity is associated with self-condemnation, a stance roundly criticized by Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he penned letters in Tegel prison to his best friend, Eberhard Bethge.

But this response is neither healthy nor an authentically Christian. We should thank God every day for our good fortune, for all those beautiful fruits and vegetables, for the health and safety of the vast majority of us, and of our children, and of our grandchildren. We should pray for such good fortune for all humankind. But as we do, we should also ask ourselves: Is our plenty abundance in God's sense? I do not think so. This does not mean we should scorn our earthly well being. It does mean, however, that we should do our best to share these fruits even as we are grateful for what we have been given. The abundance promised in Scripture is joy, a feeling of life's goodness and fullness. It is an awareness of life's goodness that overflows the boundaries of the self and invites others to join. And for this we should be grateful.

Some years ago now, our grandson, Bobby, said to me when he was just barely two and I was swinging him in the backyard on a sunny, crisp day as a slight breeze stirred the leaves in the trees: "Grandma, everything is everywhere." It is that childlike awe and wonder, in words as beautiful to me as any I have ever heard, that is the warp and woof

of hope and love. Delight and wonder are part and parcel of hope and trust: for without hope and trust, our hearts are locked away, as St. Augustine would say.

Life, and life more abundantly. We begin with the wonders of a good creation, in all their infinite variety. When I was an undergraduate I read a classic work in intellectual history by the philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy called “The Great Chain of Being.” This chain of being gave the student an image of human beings as stewards of a natural world fairly bursting with what medieval philosophers called a “plenitude of being.” God’s economy is not an economy of scarcity but an economy of plenty. God’s love is not diminished by being expended: it grows through giving. Does this not suggest that we have life more abundantly as we give of ourselves to others?

Life more abundantly thus understood enables us to say to certain sorts of earthly goods, “I have enough.” For we in our culture have lost a sense of enough. Our consumerist ways drive us to “never enough.” Ironically, that sort of apparent abundance is diminished in our eyes the moment we attain it. It does not satisfy. There is nothing wrong with making life more comfortable and more pleasant. There *is* something wrong if we cannot distinguish between those material goods available to most Americans in such abundance, and the abundance of which the Lord speaks.

It is difficult for many nowadays to understand God-talk. We are so immersed in rights-talk and things-talk. My rights, my wants, my “stuff.” When the Lord speaks of poverty, He evokes images of a desert of the spirit. This is the poverty that truly depletes us, a poverty that binds us to earthly excess and deflects our wills and our hearts and our minds from the immutable good that is God.

Second Meditation: Health, Disease, and Abundance

How can reflecting on health, wellness, and illness help us to understand human flourishing? Because our comfort, our freedom from suffering or pain, is so vital to convictions about our well-being, and because considering how, nowadays, standards of health, wellness, and illness frame the convictions of Americans as to whether they are enjoying life “in abundance,” we do well to take this matter up as part of any general consideration of human flourishing.

I have already suggested that we have lost a concept of “enough.” “More” is what we are about, and we associate “more” with flourishing. Having life more abundantly, however, requires of us a contemplative capacity to ask questions about goods and “the good” and to reflect on what we in fact deprive ourselves of in our quest for more . . . and more . . . and more. The point I am putting into play here is that there are vital distinctions we no longer make between flourishing and plenty in the material sense.

Consider health and illness. We all want good health. It is one of life’s great blessings. We all fear disease, especially certain diseases—the dread diagnosis “cancer,” for example. When I was a child the dreaded words were “polio” and “infantile paralysis.” “Polio” became a reality for my family and me, and the reality was every bit as dreadful as the word. Though too late to be of any direct benefit to me, we rejoiced when the polio vaccine came into use. Children now would be spared. Health would triumph over disease. Throughout my lifetime, the bar has been raised higher and higher, yet what counts as health, what as illness or disease? And without health, remember, no human flourishing in our eyes.

We have come so far and done so much. How many times have we heard the word “conquer” or “war” in relation to disease? We speak of a “war” against cancer.

Conquering germs. Winning the fight. Beating the odds. Or losing the battle. Once we conquered polio, we moved on to conquer something else. We are distressed if the war seems to go on too long against a disease like cancer. But we issue reports from the battlefield on a regular basis about just how near is the final victory.

Don't get me wrong: making headway against illnesses that cause terrible human suffering is a great achievement. God gave us minds to use. We are also gifted with free will. But our wills turned against "the good" in the fateful moment in the Garden, so Scripture tells us, and we fell. Forever after our wills were flawed. Our minds cannot attain perfection. Why mention the "fall" in the same breath as I talk about the greatness and inescapability of medical and scientific advance? Precisely because we forget on a daily basis *that* we have fallen. Now we are bent on conquering finitude itself. Mortality has become an illness; indeed, *The New York Times* in its "Science" section, sometime over the past year, headlined a piece to this effect: "Is Growing Old a Disease? Some Scientists Think So." (This title is an approximation but certainly captures the original's meaning if not its exact words.) There is even talk of "immortalization," of creating a world in which my DNA goes on forever, as though its doing so means that "I" do. Death to dying! So some sort of "I" continues indefinitely. Talk about flourishing!

When I suggested to one enthusiast—a believer—that a question for immortalization in the name of health, wellness, and human flourishing did not comport with Christian understanding, he was genuinely puzzled. When the Lord told us that we might have life and have it more abundantly, did that not mean that, if we could devise a way to live forever, we should—and in good health, too? At a wellness clinic I attended, one speaker lectured to us about the new ideal of human life in the wellness movement. It holds that,

rather than an experience of our mortality or any sense of the decline of our powers, we should aspire to stay completely “fit,” hale and hearty, and then one day just up and die—ideally after a good workout. Along the way, we haven’t then been a “burden” to ourselves and others, we have not lingered in an unseemly fashion, caught in illness and decrepitude. “Weakness” is a horror in this scenario, “helplessness” something akin to an affront against nature.

As in scenarios of plenty, the new concepts of health assume we cannot have enough. We can always grow fitter—and we should. Only moral slackers devote themselves to other things when, with their spare time, they could be lifting weights, or running, or doing aerobic dance. A form of moral censure descends on those who are unfit, unhealthy, unwell. They’ve brought it on themselves, and they should shape up immediately! Again, don’t get me wrong. As God’s creatures we are obliged to respect our bodies and to care for them. We should not treat the gift of life recklessly. We should not harm our bodies needlessly. But that isn’t what’s at stake here, is it? What is at stake is a quest for control. Nature, the Creator, set things up rather badly—this seems to be an underlying assumption. We are trapped in finitude. We are not only natals, we are mortals. We must do something about that if we are to flourish. That something means gaining as much control as possible.

Despite all our hoopla about difference, if the “different” stand before us with broken bodies and broken minds, that is a difference which our standard of wellness and health-flourishing tells us we should try to eliminate. Now we urge the aborting of such human beings, to which end we test for certain maladies. In our brave new world in which all will be born well and only grow “weller,” if I may coin an inelegant neologism here, our

current clumsy methods will have been replaced by a system of “positive” eugenics, as it is called.

It turns out there are certain categories of persons who, by definition, can never flourish. Thus, one leading bioethicist has called the profoundly retarded and the comatose “human nonpersons,” beings with membership in the human species but with no standing in the “secular moral community.”¹ Our standard of health precludes this full standing. Surely if such notions take hold on a general scale, the barriers to the elimination of such persons start to wither away. There are now no barriers to their elimination pre-birth. If we go the way of the Netherlands and approve physician-assisted or medicalized euthanasia, such “human nonpersons” could be removed from us after birth. To be sure, many of those who say that the radically “unwell” lack full moral standing and cannot flourish do not necessarily think it is a good idea to deprive them of life. Given our religious traditions, public barriers to the killing of persons with disabilities remain. But such barriers are under continuous pressure to succumb to the pressures of “secular morality,” with its rising standard of what counts as fully healthy, hence what approaches our tacit normative ideal of what it means to be fully a person, one capable of flourishing.

Standards of health, wellness, and illness are not just neutral diagnoses of a certain condition based on medical criteria. Such standards take on, perhaps subtly, a potent normative dimension and shape, the contours of our assessment of what is a good life, a healthy life, a life worth living. If I am correct here, and if we keep moving in our current

¹ The quoted matter is from Tristram Engelhardt as cited by Hans S. Reinders in his book, The Future of the Disabled in Liberal Society: An Ethical Analysis (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2000), p. 108.

cultural direction, it seems likely that, over time, the remaining inhibitions and prohibitions embedded deeply in our moral understandings as shaped by Judaism and Christianity will slowly give way.

As ethicist Hans S. Reinders has shown, “people with mental disability [I would expand this to cover all marked disabilities, whether of a mental or physical nature] and their families have reasons to be worried about their future in liberal society. The rapid proliferation of genetic testing may have discriminatory effects . . . because it brings the birth of disabled children within the focus of ‘reproductive choice,’ which makes their parents answerable to the charge of ‘irresponsible behavior.’”² The implication is, Why should *we*, the healthy, the responsible choosers, support those who have chosen irresponsibly in favor of disease or a condition we regard as diseased in some fashion?

The urge to eliminate flaws—for flaws are barriers to flourishing—is palpable. Our understanding of humanity narrows as our normative ideal of what counts as a healthy person rises to ever more ethereal heights. Accepting the unwell, those with disabilities, becomes for us an ever more arduous task. This leads to the very unhappy conclusion that a liberal culture, a good and brilliant culture in so many ways, is not in a strong position to sustain support for the imperfect, particularly if that imperfection takes the form of prolonged illness or disability. Our quest for control and prevention pushes us toward the elimination of certain conditions, and that, in turn, may invite at some terrible moment the elimination of such persons on the grounds that they may well belong to the human species but they are not full-fledged members of the moral community composed of those who thrive, those who truly flourish.

² Hans Reinders, *Ibid.*, p.x.

Let's refract this matter another way as we take up Jesus' healing mission. Did He not eliminate conditions? Did He not make the lame to walk, the blind to see? Was He not, in His own way, working to eliminate flaws and imperfections? I am not a biblical exegete, nor even a theologian, but putting the questions this way is surely not right. For Jesus helps us to think about another critical distinction that we systematically eliminate or elide altogether, the distinction between *cure* and *healing*. Appreciating this distinction may help us get closer to the heart of the matter of human flourishing.

Let's remind ourselves of some of these Scriptural moments, all drawn from the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew 8:5–17 recounts the story of Jesus' healing a paralyzed servant who is in terrible distress. When the centurion in Capernaum tells the Lord of his servant in distress, Jesus says, "I will come and heal him" (Matthew 8:7). The centurion tells Jesus that he is unworthy for the Lord to enter under his roof—"only say the word, and my servant will be healed." When Jesus hears the centurion's tale of his worldly power—"I am a man of authority, with soldiers under me"—but his weakness in being confronted with the paralysis of his servant, thus leading the centurion to the conclusion of his own unworthiness, Jesus says to him that he has not "even in Israel . . . found such faith." He sends him forth with the words, "Go, be it done for you as you have believed." And we are told, "the servant was healed at that very moment."

Hard upon this story comes one about Peter's mother-in-law lying sick with fever. Jesus touches her and she is healed. Then, the same evening, many "who were possessed with demons" were brought to Him. Matthew tells us that he cast out the evil spirits "with a word, and healed all who were sick." They are not cured but healed. The healing mission continues with the famous story in Matthew 9 of the ruler who approaches Him

with the news that his daughter has died. He pleads with Jesus to come and lay His hand on her, for then “she will live.” Following him, Jesus is in turn followed by a woman “who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years.” She touches the fringe of Jesus’ garment, believing that if she can but touch the garment she will be made well. On seeing her, Jesus tells her to take heart, “for your faith has made you well” (Matthew 9:22). Upon arriving at the ruler’s house, he tells the grieving to depart, for the girl is only sleeping. The crowd laughs but the girl rises when Jesus takes her by the hand.

Throughout the district the word spreads. Blind men follow him. It is their expression of belief prior to the Lord’s healing touch that is essential to their healing. Matthew 15 tells another story, this time of demonic possession. Here we learn of the plea of a Canaanite woman who begs Jesus to have mercy on her, for “my daughter is severely possessed by a demon.” The disciples want to send her away. We get the impression that her pleading is making a nuisance. Jesus initially says that he has been sent to the lost sheep of Israel, but the woman’s faith touches him. Great is your faith, He proclaims, and her daughter is healed.

What are we to make of all this? Should contemporary Christians be a bit embarrassed because the healing miracles seem, well, fantastic? Some have even found the healing miracles problematic because they suggest something is “wrong” with being lame, or blind, or bleeding profusely, or being demon possessed—or, as we might say, mentally ill. Here our contemporary understandings and prejudices get in the way of our understanding.

To repeat, I am not trained as a Bible scholar. But surely the stories help us to reflect on the distinction between a cure in the modern medical sense and healing in the Lord’s

sense. The cessation of a bodily sign of an inward shift—from distress and derangement to healing—your faith has made you well—is critical. Remember that Jesus elsewhere chides those of little faith who require external signs for everything. They are persons who demand “evidence” but are blind to the evidence already given. The key to authentic healing is faith. I submit that healing can occur in the absence of a cure, and that is precisely the distinction that eludes us. We don’t know what to make of it.

I observed something all those years ago when I spent months in the Children’s Hospital in Denver, Colorado, as a ten-year-old crammed into a ward fairly bursting with “polio kids”: Some were healed in the absence of being cured. There is no cure for the paralysis polio trails in its wake. Yet some were healed; others not. Some retreated into helpless “babyhood” and remained there. Others grew silent and depressed. Others angry and anxious. Yet others approached their illness with sadness—what child could not but be sad at the loss of childhood, in a profound sense—but remained calm and determined. What made the difference?

I cannot explore that question as a historical or empirical matter—why did this child retreat into emotional isolation, that child retain his or her ability to reach out to others, to participate in fellowship? But I can claim that, in the absence of a cure, there can be healing. We are in danger of losing this recognition, a recognition critical to appreciating what we mean by human flourishing. We act as though the absence of a cure is an affront and a block to flourishing. Yet studies of the worlds of dying children suggest that the children who were healed before dying of their illnesses were the children whose families were honest with them, loved them, let go of anger, and kept the family circle alive until it was broken by death. The children who were neither cured nor healed were being

“protected” by parents and doctors who believed children shouldn’t be told what was going on, who were so angry and frightened they thought primarily about themselves and not about the child. Thinking that without a cure there is only failure, healing may well elude us.

In 1944, C. S. Lewis published a prescient book, *The Abolition of Man*.³ Lewis lamented certain developments in education that focused more on our subjective sentiments than on authentic value and our engagement with the world. This approach was incurably present-minded, believing that the past was there only to overcome. We lost much of the strength of tradition as a result and moved into a world of “false” by contrast to “just” sentiments and emotions. For Lewis, we would pay a heavy price for this dereliction, for “a famished nature will be avenged and a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.”⁴

Part and parcel of the abolition of man was our alleged “conquest of nature,” Lewis argued. He worried about “selective feeding” and the terrible implications of eugenics. He worried about the pretension that applied psychology would lead us to believe we had full control over ourselves. We would be dominated by what we want rather than what is good. We might no longer be able to distinguish what is “corrupt” and “degenerate” from what is good, because these evaluations “imply a doctrine of value” and any such doctrine would have become meaningless to us.⁵

Our inability to distinguish healing from cure, our refusal to reflect critically on the exponential leap in our standard of what counts as health or wellness and the dark underside of such developments—these losses attest to the “abolition of man” of which

³ San Francisco: Zondervan Publishing, Harper San Francisco, 1974.

⁴ Lewis, *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁵ Lewis, *Ibid.*, p.65.

Lewis writes. Abolishing man, in Lewis's sense, means destroying any capacity for genuine human flourishing. Inevitably, questions of health and illness lead us back to first-order questions.

Third Meditation: Sovereign Selves and Human Flourishing

In a forthcoming book based on my 2006 Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, I discuss competing understandings of sovereignty, arguing that a version of state sovereignty that borrowed heavily from the construal of God as the site of absolute sovereign will, made its way, in turn, into contemporary understandings of the self. This sovereign self is a law unto himself or herself, a completely autonomous being who is only instrumentally, not essentially, connected to others, and so on. The sovereign self's good lies in imposing his or her sovereign will, in maximizing my choices based on my understanding of what is good for me. Attitudes of being beholden, of gratitude, of awe of that which is greater or outside the self, are alien to sovereign selves. Human flourishing, then, consists in the maximum imposition of one's voluntarist will.

There is insufficient space here to rehearse all the many arguments one might proffer against self-sovereignty and the notion of human flourishing attendant upon it. Suffice to say that one of our challenges at present is to soften self-sovereignty, to chasten and to limit such, without negating altogether notions of moral freedom. Let's assume for the moment that this is possible—that one can locate the self in some other “place.” Can one go on to articulate the good of such a self with a vision of human flourishing attendant upon such a self?

I shall lay down some markers, drawing upon Pope John Paul II's many discussions of human dignity and in what it consists. No doubt the historic context in which Karol

Wojtyla grew up and came of age helps us to appreciate the enduring emphasis on human dignity in his work. Living in the center of Europe in the dreadful years when Poland was, first, overtaken by Nazi Germany and then subjugated by the Soviet Union, Wojtyla was a witness to murderous ideologies and projects that reduced the human person to less than an animal. For the Nazis, all Slavs belonged to the category of lesser man, fit only for enslavement to a master race. Upon the heels of the Nazi catastrophe came Soviet domination and the reduction of the human person to an instrument of production.

Taking of the theme of human work in his encyclical, “*Laborem Exercens*,” John Paul II addresses the rightful place of the human person in the world of production as essential to human flourishing. Scoring all materialistic and economic thought that reverses the right order of things by ignoring the meaning of work for the human subject, John Paul ties a proper understanding of work to human dignity. All human beings, including those with disabilities, should have a place at the “great workbench of life.” Never should human beings suffer a lowering of their dignity through honest work. All systems of forced labor, all systems that turn work “into a means for oppressing man” and exploiting human labor, must be repudiated because they do “damage to the dignity and subjectivity that are proper to him.”

A second area in which human beings may flourish or suffer affronts to their dignity is family life. When families are torn apart through brutality, torture, and neglect, John Paul ties the right ordering of family life to his complex views on the human body and its dignity. In turn, his understanding of the human body and the ill or good uses to which it might be put is inseparable from an appreciation of human freedom. This vision of freedom is rather dramatically at odds with culturally prominent pronouncements that

proclaim human beings to be sovereigns of themselves, to be wholly self-possessing. In “*Evangelium Vitae*” he writes, “if the promotion of the self is understood in terms of absolute autonomy, people inevitably reach the point of rejecting one another. Everyone else is considered an enemy from whom one has to defend oneself.” The implications for society are dire, he continues, for “society becomes a mass of individuals placed side by side, but without any mutual bonds.” An authentic vision of a flourishing society construes our lives together as “co-educative.”

In this argument against abstract notions of absolute freedom and self-possession, John Paul criticizes all those who worship at the idol of the self and deny the Creator’s gift of life, all those who turn away from the saving presence of other persons. For John Paul, true human freedom—freedom consistent with human dignity—is attained in and through relationships and requires an appropriate relationship between Creator and creature. Only under God’s guidance can we open our hearts to love, and then we find that love, in its primacy, unlocks our minds to reason. When we flatten the moral horizon and make our own projects absolute, we treat our bodies and those of others as means alone.

This, for John Paul II, is one of the great tragedies and sins of late modernity. The body is the bearer of meaning and the locus of our dignity and of human flourishing more generally. We are ensouled bodies, not “spirits.” All this adds up to the perspective of the acting person, a wondrous creature, male and female, that lies at the heart of the human drama. It follows that there are various models of human existence which are shameful or wrong in themselves, which negate any possibility of authentic human flourishing, like

the master/slave model. One way or the other, he critiques all reductions of human existence to utilitarian calculations or relations of force and lust.

In his 1999 World Day of Peace Message, John Paul insisted that respect for human dignity is the basis of human rights. “The dignity of the human person,” he wrote, “is a transcendent value, always recognized as such by those who sincerely search for the truth. Indeed, the whole of human history should be interpreted in light of this certainty. Every person, created in the image and likeness of God and therefore radically oriented towards the Creator, is constantly in relationship with those possessed of the same dignity. To promote the good of the individual is thus to serve the common good, which is the point where rights and duties converge and reinforce one another.”

In his encyclicals “*Veritatis Splendor*” and “*Evangelium Vitae*,” John Paul stresses further that those who “exalt freedom” as an absolute with man as the only source of values, invite subjectivism and individualism that undermine the moral evaluation of human acts and weaken our commitment to the dignity of our selves and others. Certain physicalist and naturalistic epistemologies and philosophies reduce the human being to a physical or biological datum. The danger with such views is that human nature, understood in this way, could be reduced to and treated as readily available biological or “social material.” Such approaches cannot begin to appreciate the nature of freedom, truth, and the body as both a sign and a gift.

Cultural determinism comes in for similar criticism. It goes without saying that human beings always exist in particular cultures and exhibit in many ways the signs of that culture. The problem is that the cultural determinist is one who, by definition, believes that the human being is “exhaustively defined” by culture. How can this be, asks

the pontiff? If this were indeed the case, there would never be anything in human beings “which transcends those cultures.” That “something” lies in our natures and in the yearning deep in the human soul for freedom and truth. It goes without saying that no account of human flourishing which closes completely the window to transcendence is credible, faithful to our dignity as persons.

John Paul II notes a terrible paradox at the heart of late modernity. On the one hand, we solemnly affirm human rights. On the other hand, we deny those rights in practice given a “notion of freedom which exalts the isolated individual in an absolute way and gives no place to solidarity, to openness to others and service to them. While it is true that the taking of life not yet born or in its final stages is sometimes marked by a mistaken sense of altruism and human compassion, it cannot be denied that such a culture of death, taken as a whole, betrays a completely individualistic concept of freedom, which ends up by becoming the freedom of ‘the strong’ against the weak who have no choice but to submit.”

Such a view of freedom leads to a “serious distortion of life in society.” Those distortions are visible for all to see in certain practices, including an unlimited abortion right, infanticide, and euthanasia, for such practices give some “an absolute power over others and against others.” This is not true freedom but, rather, enslavement to sin. Because a defensible account of human freedom is central to any authentic model of human flourishing, it follows that granting such absolute power is inconsistent with human flourishing. And yet . . . we see around us all sorts of practices that offer us intimations of human flourishing, “all those daily gestures of openness, sacrifice and unselfish care which countless people lovingly make in families, hospitals, orphanages,

homes for the elderly and other centers or communities which defend life These deeds strengthen the bases of a civilization of love and life” So we are obliged to look for the “signs of hope” that can be built up, that can strengthen, defend, and form us in ways consistent with the dignity that is ours and with the human flourishing that we seek.

Conclusion

The reader will have noted that, for the most part, I proceed negatively in these meditations by noting what human flourishing is *not*. (Perhaps this is a habit instilled in all serious young Lutherans—and I was one such a long time ago.) Through negation, we can help to clear some space within which we might articulate a vision of human flourishing we can articulate and defend. I hope that these meditations serve that purpose.