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Incarnational Development

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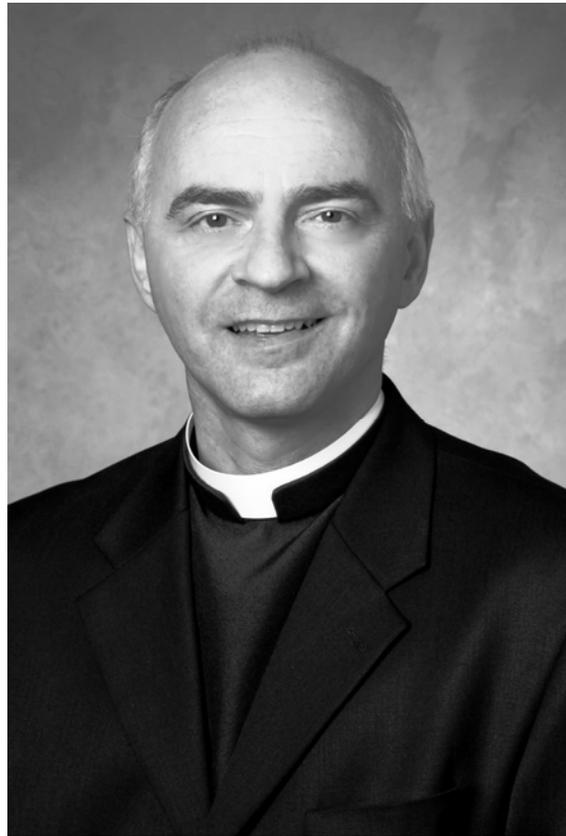
Incarnational Development

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Aside from the certainty of birth and death, all other qualities of human life are propositional. We were born; we will die ... these are the axiomatic statements of human life – i.e., self-evident. We need no proof of their truth, certainly there can be no argument. Anything else we say about human life contains the words "if" and "then" as bridge elements of the inherent uncertainty of life. This "if/then" grammatical structure implies by necessity the influence of external factors that determine and qualify their truth content. If I live until I am 14, then my voice *may* by then have changed. If I live until I am 24 then I *may* by then graduate with a BA etc. If/then bridges the numerous possibilities that can happen as contingencies of life."

Faculty Essay



Incarnational Development

By: Fr. Donald J. Lococo CSB

Aside from the certainty of birth and death, all other qualities of human life are propositional. We were born; we will die ... these are the axiomatic statements of human life – i.e., self-evident. We need no proof of their truth, certainly there can be no argument. Anything else we say about human life contains the words “if” and “then” as bridge elements of the inherent uncertainty of life. This “if/then” grammatical structure implies by necessity the influence of external factors that determine and qualify their truth content. If I live until I am 14, then my voice *may* by then have changed. If I live until I am 24 then I *may* by then graduate with a BA etc. If/then bridges the numerous possibilities that can happen as contingencies of life.

Between the two terminal necessities of life is a progression of changes that may happen but in no way do we know how many of these changes will occur before our death. Here is the paradox of death—it is an open-ended certainty. It could happen just after conception or alternatively after 100 years life or any time between. Everything that happens between birth and death we call development, because whether we want it or not, or like it or not, life is about constant change and development, for the better and for the worse.

From the biological perspective, development and differentiation of human life begins at conception. The first cell cleavage of the zygote begins a life-long development, first in the womb, then for the majority of the normal human life, outside of the womb.

Science reveals to us an astounding statistic that over seventy percent of all human conceptions never implant in the uterus. The strict Catholic interpretation is that human life begins at conception, when God unites a human soul with the developing human life-form whose cells divide, differentiate continuously for the rest of its life both inside and outside the womb. Many other religious communities agree. If human life begins at conception, then 2/3 of all human life ends in the womb even before it implants in the uterine wall. This event generates a contentious issue in the modern debate on abortion. Some find this fact mind-boggling, on both sides of the debate.

One of the arguments counter to the Catholic position that human life begins at conception suggests that perhaps alternatively it begins at implantation. For those who hold this view, it is easier for them to accept the astounding intrauterine loss of concepta. This suggestion alleviates what we would otherwise see as an amazing parade of human beings moving directly into Limbo following a two-cell or four-cell embryonic lifetime as a human being. It raises logical questions about God's plan for salvation if, right from the beginning, only one quarter of all souls have the chance to enter into paradise with God. Indeed the Catholic "dogma" on Limbo was termed a "theological hypothesis" by Pope John-Paul II when he commissioned a study requesting its clarification.

Then there are others in the debate who suggest human life begins at some later time between conception and birth. These opinions vary depending upon when people in a clear conscience conclude it is moral to perform an abortion. If human life begins, say at 3 months after conception, what kind of life was it before that? A chicken, because it kind-of looked like a chick embryo at one point, or a fish because it had gill slits for a

short time? No matter what an embryo resembles and when, its development is driven by the same DNA that continues to drive post-birth development—aging.

Biologically, it is clear that at each stage of life, from conception to death, we are dealing with the human life cycle of development. The basic process that each embryo undergoes from the moment it begins to divide its cells is aging. The embryo's existence is represented by the relationship between potency and actuality. At each stage it is actual in its form but potent to become something else. The fertilized zygote has the highest developmental potential at any stage of human life. At the other end of human life, just before one's final breath, potency is at its developmental minimum. Potency increase in life, actuality, in contrast, progresses by a reverse trend. That makes death the highest level of actuality.

Some die young. Aside from those who die naturally in the womb, the rate of death shortly after birth is low in North America, but it is a lot higher than one might expect. In 2005, the USA had an infant mortality rate of 6.5/1000 births: that was 184th in the world. Almost 20% of countries in the world have a better rate than the USA. Cuba has a lower rate, of 6.33 deaths per 1000 births making them 183rd. England has a rate of 5.16, or 198th, Canada has a rate of 4.75 or 204th. Singapore has the lowest infant mortality rate of 2.29 or 226th. Sometimes there is an advantage to coming in last.

At the other end of the human life span, the pattern is comparable. Life expectancy in the USA is 77.71 years, England 78.38 years, Canada 80.1 years, and Singapore wins again at 81.62 years.

Without belaboring the statistics on the certainties, it is apparent that most of us live well past middle age. In his *Man in History: A Theological Study (Ganze in Fragment)*,

Hans Urs Von Balthasar wrote rather eloquently on the various stages of human life.⁴ Dividing his study into three phases of human life development—The child, the youth, and the adult—his thesis is that we pass through each stage of life, fully human. As he states it, “in every stage he [sic] is a full and complete man in the creative thought of God”.⁵ It seems obvious to observe that you cannot reach thirty years of age unless you were once eighteen. And if you reach thirty, you know everything about being eighteen, which no eighteen year old could have in the same perspective. Passage from one stage to another does not constitute an increasing humanity. A child is equally human as an old man.

Each of these periods of life is not mutually exclusive, even with the passage of time. As Balthasar says, “the ages are not lined up timelessly and absolutely, like perfect pictures in a gallery; they are joined together in a stream of time, and the flowing itself has its meaning in just this progress with its irreversibility.”⁶ Personal experience of each age event requires later reflection to gain a wisdom perspective of the prior stages that are gone forever. This is what makes the young vulnerable. The age of the young can be used against them for the advantage of the unscrupulous and the malicious. The young are vulnerable to manipulation by those who know the vulnerabilities of youth better than youth can possibly know. Those in the womb have the highest potential to be victims of such malice.

Vulnerability parallels innocence. The longer that one lives, the more one loses both vulnerability and innocence. In the process we develop the potential to replace the

⁴ The translator chose this title and it reflects the convention of the time to refer to humanity as “man”. The German title, *Ganze in Fragment* transliterates as “Whole One in Fragment”.

⁵ 244

⁶ Ibid

unscrupulous as the new generations of victimizers. The cycle of abuse is an inescapable reality of human life—perhaps another candidate for one of life’s certainties. The damage perpetuated is socially inherited from generation to generation. This is the social manifestation of the Judeo-Christian dogma of Original Sin. Innocence is not lost but stolen by the very people who had it stolen from them.

Some of us pass through the sequential life stages faster than others. The reason for this disparity is that some stages are purely physiological stages. Some people are genetically predisposed to aging faster than others. Also, certain life stages can be classified as psychological and spiritual, which means you may never go through them or leave them. Some people never leave childhood, at least psychologically. Others skip childhood entirely and sit in judgment of the young at heart, a state they were denied. But, no matter what the individual experience, in each stage of physiological and psychological development, the word “human” as an adjective can be used to describe the life form of that stage.

Why does intrauterine life not compare as a life stage? A salamander embryo is just that—a salamander in an early stage of its development—which has yet to achieve motility in its swimming musculature. No scientist would claim that it is otherwise than a salamander and still be a credible scholar. A human child is not a chimpanzee, despite their tendency to climb trees. If a one-year-old child had the physique of a one-year-old chimp, he or she would be an instant world-class athlete. Yet at one a human child has a command of language that a chimp will never have, no matter how much sign language you teach it. Comparing early human life, youth, and adulthood to animals is instructive, because the comparison accentuates human uniqueness. Doing such a study allows us to

gain what we might call a “descending” perspective. It tells us more about the animal than ourselves but presents the danger of anthropomorphizing animal uniqueness.

Balthasar gives the alternative view in his analysis of human development from the “ascending” perspective. The teaching of many Christian denominations that human life begins at conception is not merely a semantic argument based on the adjective “human” modifying the noun “being”, but because of the Christological reality of God’s Incarnation as a human being. Christians believe that God became a human being. This is the grounding article of Christian faith. If one does not believe this, then one is not Christian, and the following argument can only be of intellectual and propositional interest. If so, then it would require an if/then categorization, just like this sentence. For Christians, that God became man is axiomatic.

Balthasar says of God made man,

...every period in his life acquires, even within its continuing unfolding, the character of a revelation of eternity. If the eternal Word becomes a child, then the child becomes in the framework of providential revelation the full expression of eternal truth and eternal life. This is true not only in a revelation of intensification of those eternal values that lie hidden in human childhood or are read into it by men, but also in a new way that transcends the human.⁷

Scripture portrays Jesus in all stages of human life ... at conception, in the womb, at birth, as a child, as a man, and, peculiar to Christ, in glory resurrected from the dead. In the resurrected, this ultimate “life stage” became the norm for all human beings as God’s saving and transformative gift for all humanity. If Christ was like us in all things but sin, we became more like him when he conquered sin. This “Christic” change is not merely a characteristic added to human development, it grounds the very process itself making each stage incarnational.

⁷ 245

According to Balthasar, Jesus Christ is God's Word and God speaks this Word in the language medium with his human existence. He argues that at each stage of human existence, the Word of God is a human being that expresses the fullness of Divinity. An interesting thing to note is that he sees the Incarnation of God not merely as a unique human event, nor just as transformative of all human life that followed, but as a recapitulation. God, the eternal one, entered into creation making himself subject to his first creature—time. He did so in the form of the image and likeness of the divine for us to experience by our human senses, because we also experience personal life in this human way. In fact, it is the only way we can experience life.

In the Incarnation, eternity entered time as a human being. Even though God still persists in eternity, because he is the man Jesus he is, in part, still subject to time by divine choice. From the perspective of humanity, the birth of the Christ-child was the fullest public revelation of God's divine self. It was announced by angels, witnessed by kings ... an event to be crushed and snuffed out by Herod who was jealous of his own power. Is this not the spirit in which every child is welcomed into the world, with both joy and resentment? The newness or novelty of life is both wondrously welcomed and jealously begrudged. Eventually the new becomes old and is replaced by the ever arriving new. Newness unites us together as a people if we embrace it or it divides us in bitterness if we reject it.

Each stage of human development can be seen as a new stage, full of the same kind of newness as the one before it had. Who doesn't have a vivid memory of the first day of school, that life-changing event that ruined everything? It marked us all like a scar. We re-lived its freshness the day we went to junior high, and later high school, and when we

entered college. We leave one level where we were the senior hot-shot, and enter the next level as the vulnerable freshman. Each time we become a “freshman”, our lives are transformed. Each time we do, it is a moment of vulnerability and loss of innocence.

Not only is a new born baby a new member of the human social order—an innocent individual to be cared for, who makes its presence known—one could argue that, paradoxically, the most powerful stage of life is infancy. The most vulnerable is the most powerful in its potency. The first day home from the hospital, everyone was at our beck and call. Balthasar notes, if we carefully watch new parents we see every moment in the first few months after birth determined by the little slave-driver screaming in the nursery.⁸ But their power is only theirs if parents act out their response in selfless love. Some parents never achieve that selfless love, and as a result their children become their possessions whom they manipulate their whole lives. Alternatively, those parents who let their children be, are motivated not only by their love for them, but must also recognize divinity in the stage of childhood—God speaking through the language of childhood, showing that each child is unique, God-given and God-developed. Balthasar said that Mary, Jesus’ mother, exemplified this attitude towards her son, who she was told was God at his conception.

Later in infancy, when children are mobile and vocal, these stages are also new both to us and to our parents. We communicate and we move from place to place, each the expression of new-found autonomy, a new means of expressing human freedom that was only potential in the womb. Parents are bound to preserve the potential of their children’s freedom by directing them in right-choosing, keeping them away from traffic,

⁸ He calls them “charming little tyrants” 252

hot stoves, and rose bushes. Both talking and walking open avenues of possibility in life that are very positive and essential. Both are also means of getting us into trouble.

Puberty is certainly new, shockingly so to everyone. Yet other new means of expressing freedom also emerge, but also loss of freedom as we bind ourselves to powerful forces of learned behaviors that are often called bad habits. Then graduation, new job, marriage, children born, bankruptcy, etc. Each, as it comes, is new to us—each has the potential for greatness or disaster, partially because of our choices, but often because external circumstances outside of our choices can determine them.

The Word of God also experienced each of these novel changes as a human life, and in some way still does also in eternity. In choosing to become completely human, God chose to limit his divine freedom. Christ's humanity, even though resurrected, must still somehow relate to our human life as the ultimate standard of comparison. Another level of newness unique to Jesus was that *God-made-man experienced these changes*. It was actually new for God to experience puberty. And what was more, this novelty was a once only event. It will never be novel again because in happening once, just as eternity entered into time just once, it need not ever happen again because all time was altered with the newness that was each moment of Christ's human experience. Human birth was altered permanently ... puberty, aging etc., all by Christ's experience of it in the life of Jesus the fetus/infant/boy/youth/man. The very nature of Christianity is characterized by this unique newness of the Incarnational reality of God's presence among us.

Jesus said in John's Gospel, "I will be with you always, until the end of the age". If Christ is present in all time as the Incarnate Word as God in the form of a human life, then was he not also fully God and man at the moment of his conception? Why would

that moment of conception have to wait until the zygote Jesus became implanted, or passed beyond the third month of pregnancy, before he suddenly became God-made-man in Mary's womb? This is the Christological basis of claiming that for each human life, we are fully human at every stage of development, from conception to death, as human spirits embodied within the human form of that stage of development. At each life-stage, Christians see themselves in relationship, not only to their fellow human beings, but to the God made man.

Each stage of life is new in the ever-new presence of the Word of God who is with us always until the end of the age. As children, Christians identify best with the Christ child, and later with the 12 year old whom we ourselves may have aspired to be, or the man who embraced the children and blessed them, or died for others. Children identify with Jesus at these stages because they recognize a common life experience they share with him. Adults relate to others with the Christological model presented by gospel and tradition as the ideal to imitate, or recognize how far they fall short of that Christological ideal. We enter a womb-like space after death also, but by then, the body has lost all its potency and all sign of any physical development, except decay – perhaps its opposite. In resurrection, life breaks through to the fullness of infinite actuality. This is the moment of recapitulation in God.