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Tenderness and the Gas Chambers

by

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*The following is an address by the author, who is from the John Paul II Institute
for Studies on Marriage and Family*

The title of this conference is taken from a novel written by a doctor. The author is Walker Percy. The novel is his last one, *The Thanatos Syndrome*, written in 1987. It tells the story of a psychiatrist who discovers that the government is conducting illegal mood-altering experiments on the unsuspecting population of a small town in order to eliminate violent crimes. The time of the action is in the near future. Abortion and euthanasia have become a common practice in the medical profession. Living in the same place is this old priest, considered an eccentric because he refuses to live in a parish and minister there. Instead he lives on top of a tower used to spot forest fires. In one conversation with the psychiatrist, the priest tells him of his refusal to preach. It is useless, he says, because *words have been deprived of their meaning*.

Words convey experiences of life, experiences of our relation to nature, to the world and to others. Most important, words express our experience of the cosmos, that is, of the universe as a whole, of reality. Language expresses our relationship, our attitude, our stand with respect to the reality we experience. That is why certain words or expressions should not be translated literally, for they would not make any sense. Take, for example, the expression: "I'll buy that" to indicate agreement with what someone says. To my knowledge, there is no language other than English where buying is synonymous with agreeing. This tells us that those who use that expression experience the exchange of ideas and information in commercial categories like buying and selling. To live is somehow experienced as one great commercial enterprise. When you translate "I'll buy that" to another language, you'll have to simply say "I agree" in that language, but something has been lost in the translation of your experience of reality.

Words, then, are signs, they are symbols, that convey much more than information. They convey personal experiences. To grow up speaking a given language is to experience life as those people who speak that language experience it. When you use words, therefore, you are communicating much more than your

own experience, you are communicating the most fundamental and profound experience of an entire people. That is why, even when a word is exactly the same in two languages, and even when it has the same dictionary meaning, the word may convey false information because the experiences and attitude to reality of the two persons speaking are different. For example, "yes" and "no" do not mean the same to an Anglo and a hispanic person. When an Anglo wants to say no to someone's proposal, he or she will just say no. The hispanic is different. There are many situations when to say no bluntly may be considered insulting of the other person, disrespectful, especially if it is someone with whom you have a close relationship. Therefore the hispanic will say "yes" while having no intentions of going along with what is proposed. Yet this is not lying! Another hispanic will know deep inside, that the yes may still mean no, because the other hispanic shares the same fundamental pre-supposition about interpersonal relations. This example was once used by the Archbishop of Miami in a talk to Anglo pastors who are angry with hispanic parishioners because they agree to do something and not do it, or who wonder what they have done to offend some parishioners to whom they said no about something, but certainly they did not intend it in an offensive or insulting manner.

Words, therefore, will signify adequately when there is a common tradition of experiences between those who are speaking. In *The Thanatos Syndrome* the old priest says that he does not preach because the most important words about life have been deprived of the experiences of the tradition that gave rise to them and are now used to convey other experiences, experiences contrary even to the original ones behind the words. Words "no longer signify" what they once did, he holds.

Let me give you an example. A preacher might say, invoking great spiritual masters of the Catholic Tradition, that you cannot know God unless you know yourself, because God is present in the deepest part of yourself. This is what the word "interiority" means in spiritual theology: God is interior to us. Yet I suggest to you that a preacher who says that today will be understood in a way totally opposite to what "interiority" and knowledge of self meant to the great Catholic masters of spirituality. Why? Because the modern way of thinking has *secularized interiority*. It has made it a *psychological concept*, not a spiritual one. The reduction of spirituality to psychology is one of the main reasons why the traditional words of Catholic doctrine no longer signify what they once did. If they are used, they will not only signify adequately what the Tradition meant, they will actually mislead us away from what the Tradition meant. Modern psychology developed in a culture that rejected the transcendent dimension of human existence, that is, the relation between a human being and a God that is totally beyond what we think, imagine, or desire, the God who lives in "unapproachable light" and can only be approached if He gives us the capacity as a gift, a grace which in no way depends on our powers to accomplish what it does accomplish. The modern world rejected that and made the human being, and human capacities and needs, the measure of what is real, of that which is of importance to human beings. Modern psychology has its roots in that rejection. The results of all its experiments and its speculations are necessarily affected by that

rejection; they are the fruits of that prejudice. They are not "objective scientific" results; they are prejudiced results. When modern psychology insists on the need to know ourselves it does not mean what, say, St. Augustine meant. For St. Augustine, knowing oneself is knowing as God knows us, as created by God, as existing because of the free decision of a transcendent God. Modern psychology means, by it, knowing ourselves precisely as the authors of our individual existence, as the makers of our identity. The father of the modern age, Rene Descartes, said: "I know, therefore I am." Cardinal Ratzinger says that the Christian claim is not that; it is "I am known, therefore I am" (Known, of course, by the God who created me and sustains me in existence). The words "know yourself," therefore, have been secularized; they have been deprived of the depth they once had; they have been "deprived of their meaning" (Percy calls this the "evacuation of the sign.")

Now, *it is this this evacuation of the sign which, according to the priest, lies behind the medical profession's willingness to perform abortions and practice euthanasia*, all in the name of compassion or tenderness. What has made this possible is the secularization of the word "tenderness." Tenderness has been deprived of its meaning. The word no longer communicates the experience of transcendence that it once conveyed.

The old priest in *The Thanatos Syndrome* asks the psychiatrist to play a word free-association game with him. The words chosen are: clouds, Irish, Black, and Jews. With clouds the psychiatrist associates "sky, fleecy, puffy, floating, and white." With Irish he associates "Bogs, Notre Dame," and the generic name "Pat O'Brien." With Black it is words like "Africa, minority, . . . civil rights." In each case the psychiatrist has replied with concepts, ideas, descriptions, general terms that apply to many things in addition to the given word. But with Jews it is different. With Jews the psychiatrist mostly associates the names of concrete Jews that he knows or has known, concrete persons. The priest says: "What you associated with the word-sign Irish were certain connotations, stereotypical Irish stuff in your head. Same for Black. If I had said Spanish, you'd have said something like guitars, castanets, bullfights, and such." These words have been evacuated because they no longer mean something real and concrete. They designate *abstractions* that apply to many examples. In the case of Jews, however, the vast majority of associations were concrete persons that really existed. The word Jew, the priest says, cannot be deprived of its meaning. It cannot be made abstract, theoretical. The reason is that the one thing that defined Jews is that divine intervention that made them, and just them, the chosen people. This is the only reason Jews are distinct, absolutely distinct from any one else, because their existence, their identity comes from God as a free, un-merited, sovereign decision of His, inexplicable in human terms. There is absolutely nothing in the Jews that made them the chosen people; it was God's free decision. Indeed, without this divine election there would be no Jews. Indeed, even Jews that do not believe in God consider themselves Jews. A transcendent God is the guarantor of Jewish existence and identity. Jews exist as a sign of transcendence and nothing else. What happens to Jews, then, in a world where the experience of transcendence has been rejected, suppressed, and even lost? In that world, Jews

stand out as an unbearable singularity that must be eliminated if it cannot be made to assimilate into the general, the theoretical, the same. The priest says: "this offends people, even the most talented people, people of the loftiest sentiments, the highest scientific achievements and the purest humanitarian ideals." The reason is that such people have fallen victims to abstract, theorizing, generalizing thinking such as science needs to express its universal theories, placed then at the service of technology in order to improve human life. Science and technology require abstracting thought. The culture created by science and technology, such as ours, cannot tolerate the singular, the concrete, the unrepeatabe. It cannot tolerate the truly personal. It cannot even see it. That is why it cannot see anything wrong with abortion or euthanasia. It cannot see personhood in the womb; it cannot see personhood in the sick and aged that no longer function or perform acts that fit their theories of authentic human behavior. For that way of thinking, human imperfections and suffering are useless; they are not mysteries pointing to transcendence; they are problems to be solved, malfunctions. And when they cannot be solved or fixed, those who are in this condition cease to be human as science and technology defines the human and therefore they are discarded as one discards the totally useless. Their existence is seen, even experienced, as a painful and sad failure, and so they are put away *in the name of compassion or tenderness*. That is why, in such a world of secularized interiority, our modern world, *tenderness leads to the gas chambers*.

Percy's words are so magnificent that I want you to hear how exactly the priest explains this:

"You are a member of the first generation of doctors in the history of medicine to turn their backs on the oath of Hippocrates and kill millions of old and useless people, unborn children, born malformed children, for the good of mankind - and to do so without a single murmur from one of you. Not a single letter of protest in the august *New England Journal of Medicine*. And do you know what you are going to end up doing? You a graduate of Harvard and reader of *The New York Times* and a member of the Ford Foundation's Program for the Third World? Do you know what is going to happen to you? . . . You are going to end up killing Jews . . .

"If you are a lover of Mankind in the abstract like Walt Whitman, who wished the best for Mankind, you will probably do no harm and might even write good poetry and give pleasure . . .

"If you are a theorist of Mankind like Rousseau or Skinner, who believe he understands Man's brain and in the solitariness of his study or laboratory writes books on the subject, you are also probably harmless and might even contribute to human knowledge . . .

"But if you put the two together, a lover of Mankind and a Theorist of Mankind, what you've got now is Robespierre or Stalin or Hitler and the Terror, and millions dead for the good of Mankind . . ."

And at the end of the book, in a homily to the medical community engaging in the experiments with drugs to eliminate violent crime he says:

"Never in the history of the world have there been so many civilized tenderhearted souls as have lived in this century.

"Never in the history of the world have so many people been killed,

"More people have been killed in this century by tenderhearted souls than by cruel barbarians in all other centuries put together . . .

"My brothers, let me tell you where tenderness leads. . .

"Tenderness leads to the gas chambers."

Dear Doctors: today you start again St. Luke's Guild as an association of

Catholic Doctors. I believe Dr. Walker Percy, who is now in eternity at last, has an important lesson for you in that book, and recommend you read and study it carefully. Twenty years before, the novelist Flannery O'Connor had made the same point almost in the exact same words. But since she was writing an essay and not a novel, and an essay as a Catholic, she was able to go to the very roots of the problem as our Catholic faith reveals it. Ms. O'Connor was writing an introduction to the story of a twelve-year old girl who had died of a disfiguring facial cancer after years of being an inspiration to the care-givers and other patients in the facility where she lived. O'Connor was arguing that today many people would see no meaning to this girl's life. She would be a "problem" that could not be solved by science and technology, and therefore the fulness of her humanity would not be appreciated by those whose way thinking corresponded to the scientific, technical, abstracting, theoritizing, problem-solving way. And she wrote that those people, in order to "cut down human imperfection," would be destroying that which our faith tells us is the "raw material for good" (since our faith sees human suffering as capable of bearing tremendous spiritual fruits). "In this popular pity," she says, "we mark our gain in sensibility but our loss in vision. If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic, unsentimental eye of acceptance which is to say of faith. In this absence of faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chambers."

Now we are at the heart of the problem. Notice what she says: the source of tenderness is *the person of Christ*. Otherwise, it is wrapped in theory, and theory cannot include what is unique, singular, concrete and unrepeatably. Theory cannot deal with *persons*. Theory can deal with "the poor", but not with that unique poor person. Theory can deal with "the suffering", but not with that unique suffering person. Theory can deal with "the sick", but not with that unique sick person. Theory cannot grasp the singular, it reduces all to one common denominator so it can derive laws of behavior, statistics, and programs of action that deal with problems to be solved, not with persons to be loved. Each single human person is unique and unrepeatably because of his or her interiority, because his or her transcendence, because of the roots of personal identity in a God Who is absolutely beyond what this world could ever imagine or reach with its powers and techniques. A culture where transcendence has been rejected is a deadly culture for persons. This, I propose to you, is the culture in which we live right now. It is, as John Paul II said bluntly again and again in Denver, a culture of death. And it is in this culture where you exercise your vocation as healers, as Doctors. Learn well, then, what Flannery O'Connor saw so clearly: the only remedy against theory is the person of Jesus Christ, since He and He alone is the One from Whom our transcendence as persons comes. We are persons because He became one of us. He is the Chosen One of God. He is Israel. He is all Jews. And in Him we become Israel, we are chosen, and as such, our existence comes from beyond this world and therefore cannot be subject to the calculations and standards of this world.

This insight must be at the heart of your activities as members of St. Luke's Guild. Its purpose must be to sustain you, Catholic Doctors, in your Church life united with Jesus Christ. This alone will prevent you from surrendering to the way of thinking of the dominant modern culture with its theories and abstractions. St. Luke's Guild can help you avoid this surrender by providing opportunities for you to experience the concrete, tangible Presence of Jesus Christ in the life of the Church. Anything else would be useless, and even dangerous.

Many Catholics have lost the experiences of the Catholic Tradition behind such words as justice, love, sin, eternity, suffering, and compassion or tenderness itself. Their Catholic faith has become another abstraction, another theory. That is why Pope John Paul II has called for a New Evangelization. Its purpose is to restore to us those experiences. These experiences can be found only in that life of personal union with Jesus Christ that is the life of the Church. Having lost these experiences, the Church, and even the Person of Christ Himself have become empty symbols, abstractions, inspirational concepts, ways of acquiring moral values. Indeed **I warn you of St. Luke's Guild becoming a circle for ethical or inspirational discussions.** This would be deadly; it would fall right in the hands of the dominant anti-Christian and anti-human culture that has killed and is killing millions through medical knowledge. As strange as it may seem, I urge you to beware of a fascination with medico-moral issues *detached from the only context in which they can be discussed without harm*, namely the context of a living experience of the following of Jesus Christ. This is the most important and wonderful teaching of the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, which must become one of your most important sources for reflection. This encyclical makes clear that the moral life is lived in the following of Jesus Christ, the *sequela Christi*. Moral reasoning takes place in a dialogue with Jesus Christ, such as that of the rich young man upon which *Veritatis Splendor* is based. That is why perhaps another important source for reflection is the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It is wonderful that you begin this revival of St. Luke's Guild just a few days after the Catechism appeared, at last, in English. When it appeared in Europe, all secular observers were amazed by its serenity, its confidence, its concreteness, its attractive confidence that God has indeed entered this world in Jesus Christ and that it is possible to experience this presence and come into contact with it with all our faculties, including our senses. The appearance of Jesus Christ is an event, a reality that happens, and Christians are those to whom this has happened, such that they have seen and believed. The gospel is about this real event offered to us; it is not about moral theories, values, and problems to be solved.

Finally, and most important, St. Luke's Guild must provide the opportunity for you to experience the life of the Church as friends and companions brought together to experience that solidarity, that communion, that being-together *without which it is absolutely impossible to be a follower of Jesus Christ*. Either the Guild offers the opportunity to experience the life of the Church together — to truly experience the Catholic faith as a way of life, as an experience of reality — or it will be a waste of time, because it will not address the origin of the unrest that has moved you to revive it. Whatever you do, it must flow from the experience of Mass and the Sacraments together, celebrated together, lived together,

experienced together. Without this, everything else will be deprived of a contact with reality and thus easily domesticated and put at the service of the dominant modern mentality that has led to the culture of death, where M.D. so frequently means now "Merchant of Death."

I commend you to the protection and intercession of Mary, the Mother of the Eternal Son of God, in whose womb He became flesh: her flesh, our flesh.
