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Most pitiable people of all

Consider this: however Dr. George Tiller and his murderer, Scott Roeder, may have differed in the matter of abortion (and they surely did!), they both agreed that homicide was an acceptable solution to certain kinds of problems. One may quibble as much as one wants about whether Dr. Tiller regarded what he did for a living as homicide, or that it was legal, or whether Roeder's pulling the trigger was an act of justified defense of innocent life. Each of them has taken human life, and may God have mercy on them both.

But the point at which the killing of another human being becomes an acceptable means of following Jesus (and both men were Christians), at that point the Christian community becomes "the most pitiable of people." Why? Because, by definition, homicide concerns "this life only." It constitutes the end of it, to be sure, but it has no effect whatsoever on eternity, except insofar as one's choices in "this life only" are what one carries with one into the next. If there is no such thing as eternity, then we are indeed at war in the savage competition for survival. But if there is such a thing as eternity: in other words, if Christ *is* risen *and* the dead are indeed raised *and* our survival, if you will, is guaranteed for all ages, then what do you imagine the encounter between Tiller and Roeder will be like in and for all eternity?

(Though I should not have to mention it, if anyone reading this letter takes actual comfort at the thought of either one of them in a situation of eternal negativity, or hell, then he or she has a more serious personal and spiritual issue than can be dealt with in this letter.)

Make no mistake: to those who have or wish to have power in our society it is a far more significant matter that you be a Republican or a Democrat than that you be a Christian. This is totally understandable in a world in which Christians are indistinguishable from everyone else, in a society that has baptized and continues to baptize every kind of atrocity in the name of the Holy One. In this life and in our day, to voice criticism of the kind of Christianity that focuses on the temporal and impermanent rather than on the permanent and eternal is to risk ridicule as a pious anachronism, at best. At the very least, anyone who does so arouses the scorn of conservatives and liberals alike, and subjects oneself to vicious attack from both right and left).¹

¹ We have even arrived at the point at which a famous and very well paid political commentator urged Christians to run quickly away from any church or any clergy person who preaches the Gospel if the words "social justice" come up in a sermon. Such patent absurdity, not to mention brazen anti-Christianity, can only make sense when the Gospel is rendered null and void, when, operationally, "Christ has not been raised," and "empty is our preaching; empty, too, your faith" (1 Corinthians 15:14). It bears mentioning that "Social Justice" is the title of Part Three, Section Two, Article Three of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* promulgated by Pope John Paul II.

Laws do not save one from death. Systems for the production and distribution of goods and services do not save anyone from death. Both systems leave the impression that they are promising something like life, but it is a promise they are unable to deliver on. Moreover, neither the State nor the Corporation is a real person, and neither is the object of God's eternal salvific interest and activity. On the contrary: both the State and the Corporation are the very definition of impermanence and temporality. It is of the essence of them to be ephemeral, transitory, and passing.

The State and the Corporation are no more than the ultimately fictitious patterns imposed by human imagination upon the apparently random data of existence, the "dots" we must connect in order to find meaning and purpose. However—and this is vitally important—they are made up of *people*, real human beings, created in God's image and likeness. God's eternal salvific interest and activity are very much directed at them, which is to say, at *us*. It is we who are the dots that above all need to be connected to one another. And we are thus connected, according to the purpose and design of the One who created us in order to spend eternity with one another in the Creator's loving embrace.

There is a sense then (though it must be very carefully understood) in which one can say that both Corporation and State, together with their rules and their activities, are utterly irrelevant in terms of the choices a Christian is called upon to make in following his or her Savior in confronting human or cosmic evil. This, in truth, is where martyrs come from. Christians have no problem with just laws and practices; or, rather, laws that are just should have no problems with Christians. The Kingdom of God is not opposed to the human good.

Unjust laws, no matter how well intended, do not oblige in conscience (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1903). Indeed, they must, on the other hand, be resisted. No one is permitted to commit an evil so that a good may come of it. And no law is *ipso facto* a good or just law merely because it is duly, legally, and democratically enacted. However, the extent of an individual Christian's capacity to resist evil is a function of that Christian's faith, fidelity, and courage. It is also a function of the extent to which the pastoral activity of the Church is oriented toward building up the Christian community and individual Christians for this struggle, not the extent to which such activity is able to organize the Christian community to achieve political, still less partisan, objectives. Society may be split into camps of every political stripe, and our fellows may try to label us as liberals or conservatives, but the fact is that the Christian can afford to be neither. We have our hands full following the Master, who leads us neither right, nor left, but straight up.

States and Corporations may be able to make life in this world more livable for some (though nearly always, if not universally, at the expense of

others). At their best, they can seek to provide justice of a very human and limited sort. By means of force and fear, they can provide—more or less—something of the tranquility of order that St. Augustine says is constitutive of peace: at least whatever peace this world is capable of knowing and bringing about. They are certainly capable of egregious injustice and of being the cause of unspeakable suffering on a global scale, though they are by no means the only causes of human suffering (hurricanes, earthquakes, diseases, and tsunamis come to mind as elements of the enormous power of evil in its non-human forms, even when human activity is implicated in them at some level).

He is risen indeed!

It is precisely in the encounter with the most extreme forms of cosmic and human evil that the power of the world is exposed in its weakness. There are no worldly utopias, liberal or conservative. Even a perfect society is powerless to raise anyone from the dead. Jesus Christ is the only “leader and reviver of those who have fallen asleep” (*Resurrection Homily of St. John Chrysostom*). Only he has conquered death and hell, and only he has the power to grant resurrection to us “poor, banished children of Eve” (*Salve Regina*). If he alone can do this for you, how “realistic” is it to follow anyone or anything that would separate you one inch from him and his teachings?

Christ’s promise of the resurrection is not at all “pie in the sky when you die,” but it does invite us to evaluate ourselves, the world, and everything in it *sub specie æternitatis*, from the perspective of eternity. This is the angle from which we can see more clearly who we are and what God’s design for us is.

Our country has become embittered by fractious political battle that can now be characterized by the enormity of the lies that have been generated on all sides of it, and the pathetic posturing of many in whom statecraft has shrunk to the level of winning at all costs. We seem unable to bring an end to two unjust wars that, despite their economic cost and the exorbitant amount of suffering and death they cause with ever-increasing efficiency, barely make it to the evening news. Hatred and the groups that have been established to foster it are on the rise in the land, while terrorism continues to grow in boldness and bloodiness worldwide. Children—those who manage to escape being aborted—have their innocence stolen from them at an earlier and earlier age, while they are at the same time becoming commoditized, regarded increasingly as the object of someone else’s “rights.”

I could prolong this catalogue, but I believe you can understand my meaning without my proving to you what a curmudgeon I have become. Is this the society one ought to trust to teach us how to connect the dots of existence?

It is beyond the scope of this letter and my authority to author prescriptions about what the Church worldwide needs to do. My hope in writing you this letter is to inspire hope in you, my brothers and sisters of the Eparchy of St. George, not despair. I am writing so that you may find your own way out of the decay and corruption of a world that knows nothing of resurrection. I feel that I can say to you, with our Lord, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11).

I feel I can say these things because, even as I write them, my heart is filled with joy, and I dearly would love you to know some of this joy. My joy is so intense because we have such a God as has traveled the path of our life with us, the dark path we all must walk, the path that leads each of us to the grave. But because he has done this, he has killed death and debunked the lies with which that which would enslave us continually attempts to deceive us.

I invite you to share my joy by making every effort to engage your life with the life of Jesus. If you cannot find him anywhere, I suggest you go to his tomb. You will not find him there either—and that is exactly the point. Christ is risen indeed, and that means the dead are raised and have not perished. It means that your faith and our preaching are not in vain. It means that, far from pitiable, we who know and live the light of the resurrection are the most enviable people of all, for the risen Christ still lives in time and space through us, his Mystical Body.

People of God, I want with all my heart for you to know this and be utterly convinced of the purpose and design of God in your lives as you wander in your deserts. Follow the Good Shepherd with every step, and see for what joy you have been created. All that you have done, all the sacrifices you have made for your churches, have one aim: that you may know that Christ is risen, and so are you. Monks and nuns, I ask for your tears and prayers for God's people of this Eparchy, so that they may see in your lives how love transforms loneliness into holy solitude and penance into joy. Deacons, I invite you to sing your prayers with enthusiasm and beauty so that the people may know that their Father hears them. Priests, I invite you to see to it that nothing in your care take pride of place over the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and its incarnation in love at your Eucharistic gatherings.

It is no anachronistic piety that advises you to seek the imperishable instead of the perishable, the eternal instead of the temporal, the permanent instead of the ephemeral. You have been designed for eternity, so begin to live that eternity now! See the beauty that God has put in you forever and rejoice! Drink deeply of the new drink flowing from the empty tomb and be refreshed for the wearisomeness of the journey still ahead of you.

Stop trying to win converts to your politics and instead win converts to Jesus Christ. Do not be ashamed or embarrassed to do this because you think you are not holy enough to witness on his behalf. Do not worry that you do not deserve eternal life, because it is the free gift of God, and God wants your friends to know eternal life, too. As St. John Chrysostom reminds us: "Do you see the grandeur of this gift? But now, my dear friend, preserve the grandeur of this gift. You cannot live in indifference. Inscribe the law well in your mind. This life is a battle: those who fight on the battlefield can defend themselves well from anything that might thwart victory" (*On the Resurrection*).

The war against humanity is already won; be brave in your daily battles. Have no fear, for Christ is risen!

With my archpastoral blessing and the pledge of my prayers for you always, I remain

Your companion on the Way,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Michael". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.