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An Overview of the West

What does a nation need in order to thrive? More specifically, what do Western nations need today? More precisely still, what is it that our Hispanic American nations need?

At the beginning of this millennium, we find ourselves facing a West that has been battered: divided by wars, but above all shaken and disoriented in its very identity.¹ When we turn to the challenges confronting our nations in the Americas, we see, moreover, that we suffer not only from the afflictions of a culture that has been denigrated, but also from the hardships of structural poverty affecting millions of people.² In this context, there are many challenges that must be addressed if an American nation is to recover and move forward. Yet I would like to focus on one

1 We also see a Europe that is less secular, though not more Christian; rather, it is becoming increasingly Islamized. This has given rise to cultural reactions that, at least for now, have not yet resulted in a genuine spiritual renewal of the Catholic faith.

2 How is it possible that countries with Catholic majorities continue to experience so much injustice? What is this, if not the personal inconsistency of their leaders and citizens? This happens when faith is lived as nothing more than a Sunday adornment, rather than as the leaven of the heart that transforms every aspect of a person's life.

aspect that cuts across the whole of the West and that, I believe, is the root cause of all the others: its spiritual life.

Our countries are currently undergoing a cultural and political shift. We come from decades in which not only left-wing governments have predominated politically, but also a worldview marked by a collectivist tendency, in which the state has played a central role in the political and cultural life of these countries. The economic, social, and moral failures of the political left in the Americas eventually carried over into the political arena. The political outcomes of the past three years (in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, the unsuccessful cases of Ecuador, the possible results in Colombia, and so on) have reflected this shift toward the political right or center-right. And what can be said of the cultural sphere? Social media has given a voice to thinkers who had no place in the traditional media. This has made it possible for worldviews to gain wider exposure that have neutralized –and even countered– the dominance of the messages that state-backed media campaigns had previously been able to establish with relative ease through traditional media outlets.

That said, it is one thing to observe this cultural and political shift –which is fairly evident today– and quite another to consider its nature: Is it taking place in the best possible way? Is it unfolding in a sustainable manner? Is it happening in a way capable of rebuilding nations that have been deeply weakened –not only morally, but also socially, economically, and institutionally?

This is where I believe the answer –and the path forward for our countries– cannot be merely political, cultural, or social. It must also be spiritual. I will approach this subject from observations I have made personally, while also drawing on the thought of someone I hold in particularly high regard: Emmanuel Mounier, the father of communitarian personalism, who was

one of the twentieth century's foremost advocates of personalist thought, above all through his tireless work and, especially, through the witness of his own life.

I would therefore like to offer a few reflections on the contribution of spirituality to today's public debate –something as unusual as it is necessary– by presenting several aspects of Mounier's thought that I believe are prophetic for our time, and by explaining why he remains so relevant to the challenges facing our nations.

Mounier and His Time

I propose that we take a closer look at the thought and life of Mounier. Most biographies of Mounier emphasize the witness of his life even more than his thought. Mounier was never concerned with constructing a closed philosophical system. He died young (1905–1950) and never had the opportunity to produce a comprehensive conceptual synthesis. Yet his witness proved –and continues to prove– inspiring to many.

He was born in Grenoble, a small town in France. He lived through the two World Wars, the Communist Revolution, and the Great Depression. He also experienced a secularized France amid the rise of both left-wing and right-wing totalitarianisms, in an environment dominated by a materialist and individualistic culture.

Within this complex context, he founded the journal *Esprit* in 1932, creating a center for reflection on and the dissemination of personalist ideas. He demonstrated a profound commitment to reflecting on the major events of his time, engaging in dialogue with intellectuals from widely differing worldviews: Catholics, Marxists, Jews, anarchists, and others. His aim was to reflect

upon and promote communitarian personalism, which expresses a vision of the human person as unique and irreplaceable, yet one who does not attain fulfillment in isolation, but in communion with others.

Mounier sought to build a community of thinkers who would place the human person at the center, above the collectivist logics that emphasized the role of the state and above the individualism reinforced by the logic of the market. For Mounier, neither the state nor the market, but rather the human person, must stand at the center of a society's reflection and action. To place the human person at the center —not alone, not in an isolated or individualistic way, but together with others. Together with others, yet not in the collectivist manner of the totalitarianisms of either the Left or the Right.

Here the reader may begin to see why a thinker such as Mounier can shed light on today's debates. We currently find ourselves engaged in a debate over the proper role of the state and the limits that should be placed on individual freedom. Public discourse, both in the media and on social media, has become polarized between the role the state ought to play and the degree of freedom the market requires. Depending on where we stand, we find ourselves choosing between an "active state" and a "ruthless market," or between "a market that demands freedom" and "a massive, overbearing state."

In response to the deification of the state advocated by the collectivisms of both the Left and the Right, in their various forms, and to the deification of the market by proponents of a more individualistic liberalism, Mounier proposed something that remains profoundly relevant today: placing the human person at the center —but not in isolation, rather in communion with others. In other words, neither persons nor society can truly

flourish where collectivist systems subordinate the person to an all-encompassing structure, causing the concrete individual to disappear and be sacrificed for the sake of a general and abstract idea. The dignity of the person, unique and unrepeatable, can never serve as a justification or pretext for a “greater good.” It is an end in itself.

At the same time, this uniqueness of the person should not lead us to conceive of the person in individualistic terms. The person does not attain fulfillment alone, but in communion with others. To be unique is not to be individualistic.

Now, this idea of “placing the person at the center” is not fundamentally an ideological or political debate. Rather, it is a spiritual revolution. It is not so much a political, cultural, or economic program (although it may take concrete form in those spheres). For Mounier, the problem of the West is, above all, a spiritual one. And it is from that level that change must come.

Therefore, if we want to heal society at its roots, we need to transform its structures —but not primarily by adopting one system or another. Above all, what is needed is a spiritual transformation. It is worth clarifying that this spiritual focus, this spiritual revolution that Mounier proposes, is not the naïve idealism of a few well-intentioned hippies. As we have already seen, his own life and witness show that this is neither an easy nor a simplistic path: during the Vichy regime, Mounier was imprisoned for ten months because he was regarded as one of the spiritual leaders of the Resistance.

Quoting Mounier: *There is no proportion between the totality of our work and its strictly political coordinates. Politics may be urgent, but it is subordinate. The goal toward which our broadest aspirations are directed is not the happiness, comfort, or prosperity of the city, but the*

*spiritual fulfillment of the human person. If we pursue the political good, it is not because we cherish the illusion that it will secure for us a life without risk, without suffering, and without thirst. Our political action is therefore the instrument of our spiritual action, and not the other way around.*³

And in another passage, even more explicit regarding the conversion of the heart, Mounier writes: *People want revolution to be a dazzling blaze of red flames. No. Revolution is a far deeper upheaval. Metanoete: change the heart of your heart – and, in the world, everything that it has contaminated.*⁴

The deepest revolution is not the one brought about by bombs and the overthrow of governments, but the one that takes place in the human heart. It is something truly revolutionary that, at the same time, restores trust to the fabric of society through a renewed way of seeing oneself and others. Is it not trust, after all, what drives markets? Is it not trust that builds political alliances? Spiritual change, then, offers profound answers to the concerns of those who defend either the State or the Market at all costs.

Contributions for the Present

Turning our attention back to the present, we too hear the sounds of war. We too are confronted with forms of totalitarianism –some political, but also cultural totalitarianisms, primarily of the Left, with transnational ambitions. Through transnational organizations, the cultural agenda of the Left has gained ground over the past several decades, not only in the cultural sphere but

3 Emmanuel Mounier, “Revolución personalista y comunitaria” in *El Personalismo. Antología esencial*, Sígueme, Salamanca, 2014; p. 35.

4 Ibidem, p. 42.

also in the political and legal spheres through various international treaties.

As noted earlier, in recent years this trend has been countered by the emergence of an incipient cultural right, which has been carrying forward what many of its leading voices describe as a “cultural battle.” This cultural battle has gained ground primarily through its liberal wing, increasingly permeating society by exposing the inconsistencies and failures of the Left over recent decades. These are voices that, as already mentioned, exist outside the traditional media but that, thanks to the anarchic nature of social media, have been able to gain a place in public debate—whether by opening many people’s eyes or by giving voice to what many were already thinking. Personally, I count myself among them, and I welcome this cultural counterbalance, above all— and regardless of one’s personal beliefs —because of the totalitarian aspirations that, in my view, the Left has increasingly displayed on the global stage through its various agendas.

However, I wish to point out that, valuable though this cultural battle may be, I do not believe it is sufficient. It is necessary to take the further step that Mounier proposes: the spiritual revolution. Indeed, if the cultural battle is not rooted in a spiritual foundation, it will become a missed opportunity.

What do I mean by this?

If we respond to the culture and ideology of the Left with a counterculture of the Right, we create a counterweight that remains on the same level. We answer left-wing arguments with right-wing counterarguments. It is a battle fought at the level of ideas—a worthwhile endeavor, I insist— but not a sufficient one. It is an attempt to confront one ideology with a counter-ideology.

Yet to counter a cultural Left with a cultural Right is to enter into the dialectical framework of Marxism, which understands progress and historical development as taking place through class struggle —ultimately a materialist form of Hegelian dialectics. To enter that struggle, that battle, is to enter the Marxist game. And to enter into the dialectical game, I believe, is to concede —at least in part— that Marxism is right. It is to play by someone else's rules, which means we have already lost before the game —or the battle— even begins.

The best way to confront Marxism is not to enter into its game, but to transcend its materialist foundations. It is to change the logic radically —not by engaging in a dialectical struggle that operates on the same level, but by changing the rules of the game altogether. That requires us to adopt different frameworks, ones that are not confined to the merely material plane.

Materialism cannot be overcome with another form of materialism, but rather —as Mounier said— through the primacy of the spiritual and a technique of spiritual means.⁵

But here a crucial question arises: What kind of spirituality? The limitation I see in this cultural battle is that it is being waged

5 Jean-Marie Domenach, *Mounier According to Mounier*, Laia, Barcelona, 1973; p. 109: *Esprit* sought a "technique of spiritual means" that would break with the petty stratagems of political tacticians: nonviolence, whenever possible; steadfast service to the truth; demystification; and education wherever men and women can be formed —in the press, the school, the family, the labor union, the Church, and so forth; planting within all the vital organs of a civilization now grown sclerotic the seeds and the leaven of a new civilization. This work of infiltration, education, and witness has one indispensable precondition: each person's genuine break with the established disorder, and the continual conversion of the whole person —words, actions, and principles— in the unity of a single commitment. To make the Revolution, one must begin by revolutionizing the revolutionaries.

primarily by the liberal wing of the Right. And society will not find in liberalism, by itself, sufficient means to counter Marxist materialism through a spiritual revolution.

Not long ago, I heard some of these right-wing thinkers say that liberalism, on its own, is not enough; that we need to rediscover our Christian roots in order to defend life, liberty, and property. That perspective is most welcome. It is encouraging that liberals, too, are beginning to recognize it.

Here we come to the second point that Mounier criticized in his own time: individualism. Together with materialism, this is the other of the two great evils afflicting contemporary society. Mounier's approach also shows us something about what this spiritual revolution must be like: it cannot be individualistic or solipsistic. It is not a New Age spirituality that deifies the individual, but a genuinely Christian spirituality that, when lived authentically, transcends the individual and opens itself to others. It is a spirituality that becomes active charity.⁶ Mounier's communitarian personalism does not conceive of the fulfillment of the person in isolation. For that reason, a person's spiritual life is not fulfilled simply by becoming somewhat more reflective or by meditating a little. When we say that the person is a being who finds fulfillment with others, we mean that he or she reaches fulfillment by giving of oneself.

6 Mounier sought that *"spiritual rigor in the face of the two errors so common among Catholics in their engagement with political life: on the one hand, the temptation to flee from concrete reality and, believing themselves to be «rising» to the spiritual plane, to settle for a kind of solemn, dogmatizing dogmatism; on the other hand, the temptation to identify the eternal values of Christianity with particular historical solutions."* Carlos Díaz, *Emmanuel Mounier. Un testimonio luminoso*, Ediciones Palabra, 2000, p. 29.

This perspective draws the human person out of the prison of individualism. It also opens the way to answering the questions that every person asks, and that the liberal worldview ultimately fails to answer. For the human person is not merely a being who needs “certain guarantees” and the means to consume goods and services. These things are undoubtedly necessary, but they are not sufficient. And if this insufficiency goes unrecognized, it may undermine the cultural shift that this cultural battle seeks to bring about.

Human beings are not motivated solely by the material well-being that a free-market society may appear to offer. Material goods alone are not enough, just as they are not enough when they are obtained through coercion and redistribution. In the face of Marxism, the human person needs freedom and spirituality. In the face of liberalism, the human person needs justice and transcendence.

Is material well-being what truly moves society? Is struggle driven by economic conditions, such as gaining control of certain ports, markets, or rights?⁷ It is the soul alone that struggles, that

7 Chesterton remarks, with his characteristic irony, something similar regarding economic materialism as the driving force of history: *“Nero could not hire a hundred Christians to be eaten by lions at a shilling an hour; for men will not be martyred for money. But the vision called up by real politik, or realistic politics, is beyond example crazy and incredible. Does anybody in the world believe that a soldier says, «My leg is nearly dropping off, but I shall go on till it drops; for after all I shall enjoy all the advantages of my government obtaining a warm-water port in the Gulf of Finland.» Can anybody suppose that a clerk turned conscript says, «If I am gassed I shall probably die in torments, but it is a comfort to reflect that should I ever decide to become a pearl-diver in the South Seas, that career is now open to me and my countrymen.» Materialist history is the most madly incredible of all histories, or even of all romances. Whatever starts wars, the thing that sustains wars is something in the soul; that is something akin to religion. It is what men feel about life and about death. A man near to death is dealing directly with an absolute; it is nonsense to say he is*

seeks... it is the soul alone that will be satisfied. The answers will not be found in the dance of opposites. The soul is not satisfied either by a materialist and ideological conception of justice or by the mere freedom to buy and sell without taxes. We must guard ourselves against the collectivisms that alienate our societies, but also against the self-sufficient and world-weary individualisms that fail to satisfy the human heart.

Conclusion

More than once I have heard those engaged in this cultural battle say that, historically, the Left was associated with the lower classes, whereas today it is more closely associated with the upper classes. And that is true. But what accounts for this “quasi-factual” —*quasi* because I do not have statistical evidence, only my own perception— observation? That question often goes unanswered.

Those who have benefited from greater access to goods and services find in liberalism a form of individualism that provides material goods but does not strengthen them spiritually. Yet the human heart longs for something more; the liberal offer is not enough. When people do not find sufficiently satisfying answers there, they readily turn to something that appears more “spiritual” and “transcendent”: a concept of justice. It may be ideological and mistaken —as in the version proposed by the Left— but it is nevertheless a search for justice. And that is why many have gravitated toward the cultural Left.

*concerned only with relative and remote complications that death in any case will end.” G. K. Chesterton, *El hombre eterno*; Club de Escritores, Buenos Aires, 1987, p. 166.*

We cannot attribute Gramsci's success solely to his strategy. That strategy could never have succeeded in a society that was spiritually strong.⁸

I believe that, amid these challenges, Mounier remains a guiding light for a West seeking to emerge from its cultural—and above all, spiritual—agony. The cultural battle, alongside debate and apologetics, must also be nourished by a deep spirituality. In Mounier's words: *It is the quality of our inner silence that enables our outward activity to shine; action must spring from the abundance of silence.*⁹

8 Those transcendent values have not been fully conveyed by a Church that has itself, all too often, become ideologized. In any case, there are many facets to this issue, and much more could be said about it. But I will not pursue that discussion here.

9 Emmanuel Mounier, "Revolución personalista y comunitaria", in *El Personalismo. Antología esencial*, Sígueme, Salamanca, 2014; p. 46: *The human person needs a spirituality that does not isolate one from the temporal realities in which one is immersed, but instead grants the freedom to commit oneself wholeheartedly to them, without reducing one's person or one's life to any particular temporal action or cause.*