A DUTCH MASTER AND THE GOOD LIFE

By Philip Bess

What follows is prompted not by a cigar, but rather a painting by the Dutch (strictly speaking, Flemish) masters Hubert and Jan Van Eyck. "The Mystic Adoration of the Lamb" [FIGURE 1] is the central painting of twenty-four panels of various sizes completed in 1432 that together constitute the Ghent Altarpiece. Located in St. Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, the Van Eycks' painting since the time of its completion has been regarded as a major masterpiece of the northern European renaissance, noteworthy for its advancements in the use of oils, for the quality of its color, and for the realism of its portrayal of the natural world. These are but some of the reasons for its continuing importance, however; and here I propose to consider another: the Van Eycks' portrayal of the relationship of architecture and of cities to the good life for human beings.

The Van Eycks' painting is first and foremost a representation of the Christian understanding of the good life. This can perhaps be described most succinctly as redeemed humanity living eternally with knowledge and in praise of God, where (as the twenty-first chapter of *Revelation* puts it)

> The dwelling of God is with men [and clearly in the Van Eycks' view, women] . . . and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.

The instrument of this salvation, Christ, is central to the iconography of the painting, represented literally as the Lamb of God upon an altar surrounded by the community of the redeemed, His blood flowing into the communion cup that is in turn central to Christianity's ritual remembrance of His sacrifice. Other obvious biblical and theological iconography abounds; and we can further assume that there are additional layers of religious symbolism in the painting more quickly recognizable to untutored fifteenth- century observers than to untutored modern observers such as myself.

In addition to this theological order of iconography, however, there is another order of iconography that is at the same time both biblical and cross-cultural, explicit in Christian scripture but common to the rest of humanity as well. This is the iconography that forms the context of the Adoration of the Lamb, specifically

the representation of Heaven as *both* a garden *and* a city, as the New Eden and the New Jerusalem. Architectural historian Norris Kelly Smith suggests in his 1980 essay "Crisis in Jerusalem" that, more ingeniously than any painting in western art, the Ghent Altarpiece manages to represent together the usually disparate biblical themes of Eden and Jerusalem. "Plainly," he says,

> there is an order of goodness in the world that is best symbolized by the garden--a goodness that resides in personal freedom, in mobility, and in experiencing all the sensuous delights of Eden. But there is another ultimate goodness that has to do with membership, security, and above all with those products of human inventiveness, of the imaginative human spirit, that we gather together under the rubric of civilization…. [This] is the aspect of ultimate goodness to which the towers refer [in the Ghent Altarpiece]….

Who would not intuit (or at least hope) that Smith is correct: that we experience our biological nature---that I am a body---as good; and that we also experience as good our social and cultural nature---both that I am a willing member of a variety of communities, and (at the level of personal experience) not only that I am a body, but also that I *have* a body. And yet, anyone who lives long enough comes sooner or later to recognize the tensions inherent in our nature as *both* biological *and* social beings; that taken too far, assertions of individual freedom foster a self-centeredness that destroys communities and the goodness of membership and belonging associated with them; but likewise that communities themselves seem constantly tempted to tyrannies that suppress the goodness of individual freedom.

The genius of the Ghent Altarpiece, suggests Smith, resides not only in its juxtaposition and affirmation of the ultimate goodness of both the natural and social orders as both are redeemed by Christ. It lies also in the way that the redeemed natural and social orders are portrayed. It is in the garden---fallen, a symbol of the potential anarchy of nature---where we find the ordered assemblies of the faithful; and it is in the city---fallen, a symbol of the potential tyranny of the community---where we find the skyline portrayed not as rigid order, but rather as a casual assemblage of buildings.

But there is more. Tertullian famously dismissed attempts of his late-second-century contemporaries to reconcile Greek philosophy with Jewish and Christian scripture with the derisive question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Yet the history of Christianity (and Judaism too, for that matter) demonstrates precisely an at-least-partial reconciliation of Athens with Jerusalem. This reconciliation occurred theologically in the writings of the patristic fathers and the medieval schoolmen. And I would like to suggest that it occurred pictorially in the Ghent Altarpiece, which is on the one hand a specifically Christian representation of the good life, but is also on the other hand---in its portrayal of the context of the good life as both city and garden---a representation of the good life with rational appeal across a variety of human cultures, and one specifically understandable in terms of the philosophical tradition of natural law theory.

The nature of the good life for human beings is a perennial concern of natural law thinkers. Where modern consumer culture would have us consider the good life in terms of personal freedom and creativity, the possession of wealth, power, fame, health, sexual vitality---not to mention cars, gym shoes, and beer---many if not most variants of the natural law tradition would view all of these admitted goods as less important to the good life than moral virtue (character habits of temperance, courage, justice, prudence, friendship, magnanimity, steadfastness, etc.) and intellectual virtue (habits of mind appropriate to particular practical arts and / or theoretical sciences) exercised in projects engaged in with others, *and most especially in a city*. In natural law theory, in other words, the good life for human beings is the life of virtue lived in community.

It has been evident for some time that in contemporary culture it is not common to think of the development of such habits of virtue as essential to achieving the good life. Neither is it any longer common for most people to associate the good life and the modern city in the same thought. Nevertheless, even in modern America there remain sizeable numbers of people dwelling in more or less closely knit academic, ethnic, professional, and religious communities for whom the good life is not defined by the mass media, and for whom material goods are still understood primarily as means to the good life rather than the sum total of the good life itself. But to the extent that such persons do indeed understand their own

well-being to be intimately related to the communities of which they are members, their lives differ fundamentally from those of previous generations in at least this respect: that there is today much less correlation between community and place.

Architects and non-architects alike frequently express disappointment about this fact, and observe that contemporary zoning ordinances and transportation policies are not conducive to the creation of place-specific communities---by which they typically mean pedestrian-friendly towns and urban neighborhoods with distinctive, perhaps even beautiful, physical and spatial characteristics. But while their observation is correct, as diagnosis it seems incomplete, requiring sharper distinctions with respect to the degree to which modern towns, cities, and suburbs are and are not "communities." Communities, as the word suggests, are defined by their common purposes; and if the rules and practices of any specific community are not directed toward the achievement of common purposes, is there in fact a community? Modern zoning laws and economic and transportation policies are paradoxical in this sense. That is, the ends to which they are directed are typically the freedom and economic success of individual developers and entrepreneurs, and the easy movement of automobiles; yet while the former ends are in an immediate sense both good and necessary to the common good of any town or city, and the latter end a desirable convenience, neither can ultimately in and of itself form the basis of any community that defines itself with reference to the good life understood as the life of moral and intellectual virtue.

Communities of various sizes come into being to pursue various goals. We speak of the architectural community, or the legal community, or the academic community, or the business community. A choir or an orchestra is a community; a football team is a community; the local parish is a community; the crew of a sailing vessel is a community. In what sense may we speak of these as communities? It is not because their members all have warm fuzzy feelings about each other, though we would expect such communities to engender friendships. And it is not because they are necessarily democratic (though some may be), nor because they have egalitarian rather than hierarchical social relations, or vice-versa. Rather, they are communities because they pursue certain objectives in common, because they recognize the importance of specific roles performed for the achievement of those objectives, and because their members recognize that their own individual good is directly related to the achievement of their common good.

Each of these communities exists for highly specific purposes; and most of us typically find ourselves at any given time to be members of several such communities. We are members of communities long before we are aware that we are, which is part of what prompted Aristotle to characterize human beings as political animals. But is there any community that exists not simply for specific and limited ends, but for the sake of the good life itself, both for individuals and for the more limited and specific communities such as those I have cited? There is. That community is the city. Such, at any rate, is the view of the city we can attribute to Aristotle, to the Van Eycks, to Norris Kelly Smith---and to the Christian church itself, existing simultaneously as a community present in the earthly city and as herald and sacrament of the City of God. In this view of traditional urbanism, the city is that collection of practices and institutions the cumulative purpose of which is to enable its members to live a good life.

One can speak of several types of order that are characteristic of any good city, at any time and any place. A good city is quite clearly an ecological order, occupying land and existing in relationship to an adjacent landscape in a way more rather than less conducive to long term human flourishing. The economic order of a good city is characterized by economic diversity and economic freedom, and creates and distributes not only those material goods and services necessary to the material well-being of the populace but also the wealth necessary for the various kinds of non-subsistence cultural endeavors that are the marks of civilization. Equally important, however, is to recognize a good city as a moral order, characterized by an abundance of diverse institutions that are strong and influential enough to restrain the excessive individualism that a free economy promotes. Such institutions will seek to educate individual citizens in various moral and intellectual virtues, and to encourage among them a sincere and willing regard for the common good; and will, if successful, sustain the idea that the city is not only a market but also a moral community.

A fourth kind of order, typically of primary concern to architects, is the formal order of the city. Most persons understand intuitively that there is an important relationship between the formal order of a city and

its economic order, which is to say that money (and power) are required in order to build significant buildings. It is perhaps harder for us to see the relationship between the formal order of a city and its moral order. Nevertheless, while such a relationship has become problematic in the modern city, it is apparent in the traditional city. What is the nature of this relationship, and how has it become problematic?

Consider Aristotle's argument that the best life is "the life of virtue, where virtue has external goods enough for the performance of good actions." Virtues are exercised and sustained in practices, e.g., in teaching, in government, in medicine, in agriculture, in worship. Practices in turn are sustained by institutions---schools, courts, hospitals, farms, churches. Institutions commission buildings that not only shelter the institution's activities but also function (well or poorly) as *authoritative symbols* of both the activities themselves and the virtues they promote. And here is where we find the link between formal order and moral order, between architecture and the good life, in the traditional city. For the formal order of the traditional city---by its durability, its beauty, and its hierarchies---aspires both to embody and to reinforce the notion of the life of moral and intellectual virtue as the genuinely good life.

This is historically available and empirically verifiable. Traditional cities are dense arrangements of buildings and open spaces distinguished by the proximity to one another of dwellings, places of work and commerce, recreational facilities, parks and gardens, and those buildings that shelter and symbolize important communal and civic enterprises: always and above all religious and government buildings, and in recent centuries schools, libraries, courthouses and prisons, museums, athletic arenas, hospitals, fire and police stations, etc. The formal order of traditional cities is likewise characterized by some sort of architectural hierarchy (typically unofficial, but not always) wherein the grandeur and prominence of specific buildings, as well as their location fronting on streets and squares, are more or less proportionate to the purpose and communal significance of the institutions they shelter and symbolize. In traditional cities the desire of private entrepreneurs for economic prosperity has in fact been tempered by larger concerns for the impact of buildings upon the overall formal order of the city. This is not to impute exceptional purity of purpose to the bankers, merchants, religious leaders, and politicians of pre-modern cities. It is simply to say that their builderly and entrepreneurial intentions were subject to a customary and traditional civic imperative: that the formal order of their city was inseparable from the idea that their city was not only a market, but also a moral entity---an assemblage of institutions the cumulative purpose of which was to enable its citizens to have and to live the best life possible.

It is the gradual breakdown in the twentieth century of precisely this sensibility about architecture and the city---and this breakdown's physical manifestations as exhibited successively in modern and post-modern (and now "deconstructivist") architecture and urbanism, as well as in suburbia---that Smith characterizes as the "crisis in Jerusalem;" and he recognizes that the physical / formal phenomena he describes are not occurring in a social vacuum. But where Smith seemed on the verge of despair over the future of both civilization and the city, a number of similarly concerned contemporary social observers (one thinks immediately, for example, of Peter Berger, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Philip Rieff, as well as the late Christopher Lasch) who have made it their life's work to contemplate our recent cultural history and condition have concluded that if there is a remedy for our secularist / emotivist / therapeutic culture it lies in the creation and / or sustenance of intentional communities that set themselves in varying degrees apart from modern culture---until such time as modern culture is itself transformed, in part, perhaps, precisely by the work and example of such communities. It would be a tragic loss of cultural memory indeed if such an idea should appear novel, especially to Jewish and Catholic religious leaders. And since communal life necessarily takes physical form, in ways more or less conducive to communal purposes, this idea would seem to have implications for architecture and urbanism as well. Let me conclude therefore with two observations and a modest proposal.

Observation one. Although they are far from a majority, there are a substantial number of architects and urban designers today who are interested in their practice specifically as an art for and of the traditional city and small town. Calling themselves New Urbanists, their interest is in alternatives to suburban sprawl development, for reasons both aesthetic and moral. To the New Urbanists, the prevailing and still physically proliferating suburban ideal---which we may here understand not as the juxtaposition of Eden and Jerusalem, but rather as their conflation---is not irrational in desire or immoral in intent, but rather a false and unrealizable promise because its very "success" makes impossible, both physically and socially,

the good life that it promises. Their recommended physical alternative to suburban sprawl is precisely a renewed-and-transformed-and-extended traditional urbanism: the creation of compact, low-rise, high-density, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly environments, with distinct edges that demarcate themselves from the surrounding landscape and in which automobiles can function more as a convenience and less as a necessity.

The legislative mechanism that the New Urbanists propose to enable such developments (in either rural "greenfield" or existing urban contexts) combines traditional urban design master plans with a "traditional neighborhood district ordinance," a more sophisticated variation of the "planned unit development" (PUD) ordinances that today govern most large-scale development in American cities and suburbs. To date [1996], the New Urbanists have had some formal and financial success in creating physical environments more like traditional towns and urban neighborhoods---most famously in the new resort town of Seaside, Florida---but less social success. That is to say, in spite of the good intentions of their designers, the New Urbanist-designed developments generally lack the class heterogeneity that one would typically find in a traditional small town or urban neighborhood. The reasons for this are not mysterious, and have to do with the fact that New Urbanists typically work with for-profit real estate developers. In theory and intent, there is nothing wrong with this; and the truth is that the New Urbanism and its ambiance of "community" sells. The results are something else however, for the "communities" being created are still typically suburban in at least one important respect: they remain first and foremost a function and consequence of class. This seems unlikely to change so long as the construction of human settlements is undertaken by developers rather than founders, i.e., by persons whose ties to the community being built must be understood first and foremost in terms of economics rather than membership.

Observation two. Religious institutions are typically communities in which, in principle if not fact, community membership is based upon something other than class. They are likewise historically and blessedly ambitious and successful working as or with nonprofit developers in undertaking or sponsoring building programs to serve "special needs" populations, e.g., housing and / or medical facilities for the poor, the elderly, the mentally retarded, orphans, the terminally ill, etc. And this does not even take into account that today---even as the doors of beautiful urban churches and synagogues close as a result of population shifts---new places of worship on ample parcels of land (for all the surface parking, of course) are rising up to serve expanding suburban populations.

What leaders of religious institutions seem not so good at these days is recognizing and imagining both how new places of worship could conceivably function once again as town or neighborhood centers; and also how religious communities themselves might initiate alternative forms of town and neighborhood formation that would re-associate community with place and reintegrate different classes of people into an environment more conducive to the good of all. For the frankly dismal and uninspired character and quality of most contemporary church architecture is not simply about bad new church buildings. It is above all and unavoidably related to recent historic patterns of suburbanization, and the corresponding location of new church buildings in suburban environments.

The present physical reality of suburbia is that virtually every building is an isolated, freestanding, quasi-monumental “object building." And where every building is an object, neither buildings nor spaces can be genuinely monumental, nor as clearly and strongly embody authentically communal intentions, civic or sacred. The spatial and cultural problem with contemporary patterns of physical development is therefore not simply that they threaten to perpetuate "the naked public square," but more ominously that in the contemporary suburbanization of America there are no public squares.

This, needless to say, is a complex problem, and one that the New Urbanists are themselves attempting to address by means of formal and aesthetic strategies. But the problem requires more than an aesthetic solution: it requires the re-association of genuine communities with specific places, and a renewed appreciation on the part of community leaders of how good habits of place-making can advance (and bad habits of place-making can frustrate) their communal objectives.

Which brings me to my genuinely modest and I hope not at all utopian proposal: that religious leaders (or at least those religious leaders alarmed about the individualist drift of modern / postmodern culture) and the

New Urbanists temporarily set aside whatever suspicions they might have of each other and take the trouble to make one another's acquaintance. Because anybody who knows anything about either religious history or the history of cities---not to mention the history of architecture---knows that religious communities have been, and could be again, instrumental in the creation of towns and cities.

The religious models for any such town planning and urban design today are likely to be both sectarian and ecumenical. It is not hard to imagine---indeed it is happening all around us---a proliferation of sectarian communities (apocalyptically expectant or otherwise) formed by persons intent upon withdrawing from the larger world, for the sake of their sanity if not their souls. But for religious persons with sacramental sensibilities, the task of community building is both sacred and secular. It therefore more likely may be an ecumenical endeavor undertaken not only with fellow believers but with people of good will of other faiths or even of no faith. One can imagine ecumenical endeavors at town and neighborhood building, in which a variety of religious communities each true to its own distinctive traditions attempt to establish together alternative patterns of physical settlement more conducive to lives of moral, intellectual, and spiritual excellence for all than are afforded either by the modern city or the modern suburb.

Such developments would embody a desire to transform rather than withdraw from the world, a desire to create a physical and material environment fit for human flourishing. And to the extent that such environments succeed in acknowledging physically the perennial human desires for both freedom and belonging, for both nature and culture, they too will be in service to that coming Landscape and City suited not only for our own time but, as the Van Eyck brothers knew, forever.

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