



Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

BOOK REVIEW

Issue Two / 2012

This Mortal Flesh

KATHLEEN CRANE VIDMAR

Brent Waters, *This Mortal Flesh: Incarnation and Bioethics* (Brazos Press, 2009, 208 pages).

In the Pio Christian Collection of the Vatican Museums, it is possible to encounter artifacts which represent the birth of Christian art. After the Edict of Milan in 313, the early Christians of Rome began to depict the story of salvation history on the sides of their tombs. In these freezes hewn out of tufa, the artists told the story of humanity beginning with Adam and Eve and culminating in the incarnation of Christ. While confronted by these tender depictions of our shared story of faith, it is striking to realize that there are no images of either the crucifixion or the resurrection. Why?

One possible explanation suggests that these facts were too much for an ancient Roman culture yet steeped in paganism to bear. While Christianity began to take hold, the pre-existing Roman culture perceived the body as a negative limit, an imposition on the soul only finally freed from this constraint through death. Why would the all-powerful God willingly accept these limits, allow himself to suffer and die in the most humiliating way imaginable, and then upon his entry into eternal life *return* to his body? Why would the God of the universe condescend to allow his autonomy to be defined by the limits of a flesh condemned to suffer and die?

In *This Mortal Flesh: Incarnation and Bioethics*, Brent Waters suggests that late modern man is equally scandalized by the proposition of the Incarnation. Through a compilation of essays and lectures which represent a distillation of this thinker's ideas over time, Waters claims we live in an age which fosters a positive hatred of the body and its limits. In and through the lens of a dualistic vision of the body and a technological ontology, we seek not to transcend these limits through death like the Romans, but rather to overcome them *technologically*. Waters asserts that it is only in a cultural/liturgical recovery of the Word made flesh that we will find an adequate frame of reference to enter into the complex questions posed by the multifarious bioethical issues of our day.

Waters does not seek to offer a programmatic response. Rather he seeks to pose questions regarding reproductive medicine, genomics, embryonic stem cell research, cloning, brain death, and the post-human movement in light of the fact that "our mortal bodies have been affirmed, vindicated, and redeemed by God in Christ." It is in Christ, Waters argues, that our understanding of the meaning of humanity can be recovered and our cultural vision can be restored. Without Jesus, we are incapable of affirming the value of human suffering, or of comprehending how our human freedom is discovered not in a rejection, but in and through an embrace of our being embodied, finite, and mortal.

The strength of Waters' work is that he begins far removed from any particular bioethical question, and seeks to develop a lens through which we might look upon current issues anew. Like George Grant and Aldous Huxley, he seeks to describe the underlying values and convictions of a society which has allowed technology thoroughly to inform the patterns of its daily life. With our smart phones in hand, Waters argues that late modern man values mobility, autonomy, and control over the many variables of human existence. But at what cost? As the technological vision increasingly takes over, we are less and less able to give an answer to this question adequate to the truth of our humanity, a truth that is ultimately revealed in the person of Christ (ch. 1).

In his attempt to bring together works written at different times and to different audiences, Waters tends toward repetition, and the work as a whole perhaps lacks a sense of overall unity. That being said, the juxtaposition of the technological worldview against the incarnational one clearly runs throughout his text. The technological vision sees an embryo as a particularly potent conglomerate of cells theoretically useful for curing diseases; an incarnational view understands the embryo as a neighbor deserving of our respect, love, and hospitality (ch. 2). Attempting to assert greater mastery over nature and human nature, a technological culture wages war against aging and death; by contrast, an incarnational vision allows suffering and death to speak, while understanding that they do not have the final word. The "final word" is the Word made flesh, who points us beyond the sufferings and joys of our lives on earth to their fulfillment in heaven (chs 3, 5, and 7). A technological vision embraces the post-human project and its gospel of self-transformation; the incarnational perspective sees that all true transformation is accomplished by a liturgical encounter with Christ in the sacraments - with Christ at the foot of his Cross (chs 8 and 9).

Anyone who seeks to understand the significance of modern technical ambition upon the human person and community in light of Christianity will benefit from a study of Waters' work. His clear message is this: that Jesus Christ provides us the only adequate horizon by which late modern man can redefine the parameters by which he understands himself, the human community, and the world. Unless this horizon is recovered, all of our attempts to improve, sustain, or control our living and our dying will only end in a destruction of the very humanity that we hope to serve. Waters helps us to see that our task is perhaps not so much in arguing particular points of policy, but in providing adequate answers to late modern man to the same questions raised by ancient Romans. We must convince late modern man through our joyful witness that, after the model of Jesus Christ, we will find our happiness in an embrace of our being embodied, finite, vulnerable to suffering, and mortal.

