

Captive Minds and Civil Dialogue: A Reflection on Catholic Universities in the Post-*Dobbs* Era

David E. DeCosse

IT IS FITTING FOR A REFLECTION on post-*Dobbs* civil discourse on abortion at Catholic universities to start with two considerations: our propensity to derail the very possibility of discourse and the cultural forces that steer us toward such dead ends.

For such a reflection, the great Polish writer Czesław Miłosz's 1951 classic, *The Captive Mind*, is an unlikely but perfect companion. Winner of the 1980 Nobel Prize in Literature, Miłosz (1911–2004) is widely considered one of the great poets of the 20th century. He was a brilliant essayist as well. His account in *Captive Mind* of the artistic surrender of Polish literary figures in the face of Stalinist postwar socialist realism is a lasting example of the choices, compromises, and compulsion that stifle the human creative spirit and thus silence meaningful discourse. In the post-*Dobbs* era, Catholic universities should heed Miłosz's wisdom and foster a culture that freely allows artists and poets to plumb our complexities of personhood, gender, and life.

Miłosz reluctantly allowed himself to be called a Catholic intellectual but declined to be called a Catholic poet.¹ I think his hesitancy to take on such labels arises from what gives his work so much power: the refusal to let distinct human experiences of self-transcendence, abject loss, and more be absorbed into ideological schemes. The complexity of experience always outstrips such impositions. Of one wartime Polish Catholic writer who relied more on the rhetorical power of words like “grace” and “sin” than on the evocation of complex character, Miłosz said that he “blundered into falseness by living in the midst of ideas about people, instead of among people themselves.”²

Of course, *The Captive Mind* is primarily concerned with the way leading writers surrendered their individual creativity to socialist

¹ Stephen Schwartz, “Interview with Czesław Miłosz,” Center for Islamic Pluralism, April 1999, www.islamicpluralism.org/1058/interview-with-czeslaw-milosz.

² Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (New York: Vintage, 1990), 87.

realism; because of their surrender, their “minds” became “captive.” For Miłosz, this captivity was the result of the unprecedented twentieth century enslavement of consciousness at the hands of communism and fascism. The book has endured as a classic because it lays out the process by which any mind rejects its creative freedom and becomes captive to socialist realism, or nationalist fascism, or Catholic absolutism. Or to Trumpian lies, or postmodern identity cancel culture, or neoliberal salvation. Once such captivity happens, artistic creativity falters and civil discourse fails.

It is important to specify what happens in this process of captivity. Miłosz does not reject authority, a given order of values, and a basic constitution of the human person. In his Catholic humanism (my phrase, not his) he searches relentlessly to find words that both express such given realities and resist ideological distortion. Thus he says that the captivity of the mind involves the choice to contradict “an internal longing for harmony and happiness that lies deeper than ordinary fear or the desire to escape misery or physical destruction.”³ He also notes that the artist confronts the possibility of captivity as a creative person “who has no choice but to trust his inner command. ... This inner command is absurd if it is not supported by a belief in an order of values that exists beyond the changeability of human affairs.”⁴

In all of this, Miłosz is an excellent companion for our identity-based, postmodern times: he affirms the inalienable possibility of a self-transcendent personhood and objective values in the face of all of those forces seeking to deny the human and reject truth. Living in a Slavic country during World War II, he understood racist contempt for Slavs and Jews by Germans and Russians and witnessed the wild, murderous excess of the Holocaust. Attuned to the possibility of individual self-transcendence, he rejected the false universalisms of socialist realism, Catholic absolutism, and other distorting abstractions. Convinced of a metaphysical ground for human value, he scorned the lazy, privileged relativism of runaway capitalists.

So how can we more specifically draw on Miłosz and *The Captive Mind* in the face of the post-Dobbs challenges for discourse on abortion at Catholic universities?

Three pieces of his wisdom especially come to mind.

First, beware the moral naivete that comes with affluence. Miłosz praises Western societies for their limits on state power and affirmations of human dignity. But he pulls no punches in his criticism of the West on the grounds of our affluent tendency to be naïve about our moral convictions. In part, this naivete comes from our relentless individualism. In the West, Miłosz says, a person “subconsciously

³ Miłosz, *Captive Mind*, 6.

⁴ Miłosz, *Captive Mind*, 217.

regards society as unrelated to him.”⁵ Moreover, he notes that liberal-capitalist societies are organized around the fear of a lack of money while the great twentieth century Soviet and Nazi dictatorships were organized around the naked fear of the state’s power to kill. “Gold alienates man from himself; naked fear, which has replaced capital, alienates him even more efficiently,” Miłosz wrote.⁶ I take these observations as cautions for Catholic universities in the affluent West. To what extent is our discourse on abortion informed by an individualism that we insufficiently renounce? To what extent do affluence and benign assumptions about market behavior provide an implicit framework for our discourse instead of the recognition of the raw, violent force manifest in structures that oppress the lives of poor and often racialized women? Miłosz called out this capacity for moral naivete in pointed terms: “The man of the East cannot take Americans seriously because they have never undergone the experiences that teach ... how relative their judgment and thinking habits are. The resultant lack of imagination is appalling.”⁷ The same can be said about too many wealthy Catholics who seek to outlaw abortion entirely but can’t be bothered to consider the concrete circumstances of, for instance, a poor pregnant woman of color faced with impossible choices.

Second, beware the powerful but incorrect assumption that there is one Catholic way to address the challenge of law and abortion (in many quarters of the Church in the United States the requirement to outlaw all abortion is understood as an article of faith). Beware as well how this assumption has fueled a resurgent Christian nationalism that sees the wholesale criminalization of abortion as the leading edge of its political project. *The Captive Mind* takes special aim at socialist realism. The book gives no quarter on the distortions of nationalism as well. Miłosz criticized a Polish tendency either to affirm nationalism without values⁸ or to assert Christian nationalism detached from commitment to divine transcendence.⁹ I note his wariness of the destructive power of nationalism because it helps to explain his judgment that abortion is a “great crime” and that abortion should not have been outlawed in the post-Communist Polish state.¹⁰ Miłosz lived in Poland during its wartime occupation by a murderous Nazi regime and knew bitterly where such nationalisms can go. He wrote of encountering a young Jewish woman being chased during the

⁵ Miłosz, *Captive Mind*, 218.

⁶ Miłosz, *Captive Mind*, 239.

⁷ Miłosz, *Captive Mind*, 29.

⁸ Miłosz, *Captive Mind*, 112.

⁹ Schwartz, “Interview with Czesław Miłosz.”

¹⁰ Schwartz, “Interview with Czesław Miłosz.”

destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto: “She was probably about twenty years old. ... She was running down the street, her hands raised. ... She cried piercingly, ‘No! No! No!’ The necessity to die was beyond her comprehension—a necessity that came from outside, having nothing in common with her unprepared body. The bullets of the SS guards’ automatic pistols reached her in her cry.”¹¹ His brilliance as a writer evokes in that awful particularity a universal sense of horror at the death-dealing hatred that fuels nationalist racism. In his description of the incident, he also points to the troubling continuities between a desire to control women’s bodies via the use of state power in Christian nationalism and the ways such extreme understandings of state power can finally erupt and reveal what was always present in them: a spirit of domination to the point of violent destruction.

Finally, Miłosz invites us to turn to artists and poets to plumb the vast fields of experience at stake in matters of law and abortion. Discourse on these matters will fail without the inclusion of women who exercise their artistic and creative insight into realities of personhood, gender, and life in ways that reveal what is new, unforeseen, and true and ground the possibility of a discourse unable to be stifled by ideology and constantly renewed by all we do not know. **M**

David E. DeCosse, PhD, is Director of Religious and Catholic Ethics at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, where he is also Adjunct Associate Professor of Religious Studies. He is the author of *Created Freedom under the Sign of the Cross: A Catholic Public Theology of Freedom* (Pickwick 2022) and co-editor of a book series on the theology of conscience. His work has appeared in places ranging from *Theological Studies* to the *National Catholic Reporter*. He is on Twitter @daviddecosse.

¹¹ Miłosz, *Captive Mind*, 184.