



Remarks prepared for "In Need of Fresh Air: The Unique Contribution of Catholic Social Thought to the Current Political Debate." Crossroads Cultural Center, The Catholic Center at New York University, 22 March 2016.

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"Allow the human mind to follow its tendency and it will regulate political society and the divine city in a uniform manner; it will seek, if I dare say it, to harmonize the earth with Heaven." Alexis de Tocqueville wrote this in the first volume of his masterpiece, *On Democracy in America* (1835). It is a thesis that is related directly neither to democracy nor to America, but is pressed as a truth about human affairs as such. Tocqueville did think that America provided empirical support for the thesis, and that, contrary to much contemporary opinion, it needn't be rejected by the partisans of democracy elsewhere. But what could it mean to harmonize earth with Heaven? For the ancients it meant primarily a kind of symbolic representation of earthly order by reference to that of the cosmos, often through the mediation of political institutions that were understood to communicate divine authority. So the Mesopotamians believed that the gods owned their cities and the Egyptians believed that their Pharaoh was a god. The classical Greek *polis* was administered by magistrates who were also priests and the political institutions of the Roman republic were shot through with religious significance. Later the emperor himself was worshipped as divine, as Alexander the Great and his successors had been. One finds similar phenomena in Asia, for example the Chinese emperors and their Mandate of Heaven. Thus human history seems to offer plentiful empirical support for Tocqueville's thesis. But the very Christianity that he had in mind complicates things considerably.

The Gospel says very little about politics. This is not as strange as it might initially seem to a reader unfamiliar with the Christian understanding of revelation as distinct from those of the other great revelatory traditions. For Christians the revelation, the Word of God, is Christ Himself. The Christian scriptures are testimony to the words and deeds of Jesus. The Hebrew scriptures present us with God's law, and for Islam, in which law also plays a great role, the Koran in its original language and only that language is God's word. The lack of explicitly political content in the New Testament forced on early Christian thinkers the necessity of working out political ideas based on their immediate circumstances and the available pagan philosophy. During the first few centuries of the Church's history one can distinguish three main attitudes towards politics. One was a kind of harsh rejection of it. This Christian anti-politics was partly explained by the fact that some Christians expected the immanent return of Christ and so considered most earthly things unimportant distractions. Second, there was what one might call Christian imperialism, the notion that the political problem would be solved if only one could convert the Roman emperor to the faith, creating a precise symmetry between the Christian Church and a Christian Empire. The greatest spokesman for this view was Eusebius of Caesarea, especially in his writings about Constantine. While it became particularly influential in the eastern churches, this view largely died out in the West and was explicitly rejected by the greatest early Christian thinker, St. Augustine of Hippo. Augustine himself held to a kind of minimalist political theory that accepted the legitimacy of even pagan governments that maintained a social order useful to Christians as well and to the extent that the freedom of the Church to carry out its evangelical task was allowed. He was in some of his political views influenced by Cicero and the Stoics and his view constituted a foundation built upon by later theologians into what could be called Christian classicism, the greatest representative of which was St. Thomas Aquinas. It was in the context of a recovery of the philosophy and theology of St.

Thomas that the project of modern Catholic social teaching was itself initiated by Pope Leo XIII (who also founded The Catholic University of America).

I was asked to say something about which aspects of Catholic social teaching are most important in contemporary American political life. I want to first say something about aspects of the Catholic view of things that are not so useful at the moment. First, I want to mention metaphysics: if I had a nickel for every time I heard a Catholic intellectual lament some aspect of our situation and then earnestly offer something like, “if we only had the right metaphysics,” I would be a wealthy man. Alas, as important as I think first philosophy is—I am a professor of philosophy, after all—I think it exceedingly unlikely that metaphysics will help us much. It is something the knowledge of which most of the human beings who have ever lived on this planet have been innocent, and I strongly suspect this will be true of the vast majority of those yet to live on this side of the Parousia. The faith Catholic intellectuals have in the transformative power of the most refined and difficult part of philosophy is in some respects inspiring, but also rather beside the point and a cause of constant disappointment.

Second, and this may seem strange, I also think we can expect little help from the ancient and durable notion of the common good—at least as it is frequently conceived. The phrase is used or alluded to constantly by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, but its content is often vague at best and sometimes utterly mysterious. Moreover, it has at times provoked strangely exaggerated reactions. Then-Sen. Hilary Clinton kicked up a minor but revealing controversy in 2004 by some remarks she made at a San Francisco fundraiser for Sen. Barbara Boxer: criticizing Bush administration tax cuts and suggesting that they would need to be repealed, she bluntly told her audience, “We’re going to take things away from you on behalf of the common good.” Conservatives lit up the blogosphere with indignation, some calling Clinton’s speech Marxist. At the same time Catholics often have a strange faith in the power of this notion precisely as a political idea: just a couple of weeks ago in his regular column in the *Washington Post*, E.J. Dionne (whose writing also appears regularly in *Commonweal*) lamented (quite rightly) the tone of recent debates between the Republican presidential candidates, writing,

Call me old-fashioned or even a prig, but I have a rather elevated view of what politics can be and what it can achieve. For decades, in good political moments and bad, I have repaired for inspiration and comfort to the political philosopher Michael Sandel’s description of politics at its best. “When politics goes well,” he wrote, “we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone.”

This kind of feeling seems to come quite naturally to Catholics, especially on the left of the American political spectrum (think of the often anguished deliberations of America’s second Catholic president, Josiah Bartlett, played by Martin Sheen, in *The West Wing*). Perhaps this is because of the analogical relationship between the temporal common good and the common good as such, which is God. But surely politics is not the only or even the primary access we have to common goods. The analogical relationship I mentioned just now seems at times to lead some Catholics willy nilly into a kind of civic republicanism more akin to the ancient pagan view of politics than that of St. Augustine or St. Thomas. Moreover, it is exceedingly rare to find a political leader or group who does not claim to promote the common good—no candidate runs for office on the platform, “elect me and I will enrich myself and my friends,” even if that is precisely what he intends to do. Political debate is always *about* the common good; it is disagreement about what the common good entails here and now that animates political disagreement and the competition of parties and candidates for office.

Where does this leave us? In the few minutes remaining to me I want to say something more about the common good and about the way in which what I say suggests something more about Tocqueville's harmonization of earth and Heaven from the perspective of Catholic social teaching. In the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition the political community is referred to as a "perfect society" (as was the Church frequently before Vatican II). Perfect in this context didn't mean substantively the best, but rather complete in the sense that political society encompassed all that was necessary for human beings to flourish, to realize the perfections appropriate to human nature. Every action, Aristotle tells us, is for the sake of an end that is a good and so goods perfect us as the objects of our acts. Political society exists for the sake of the *temporal* common good, which is properly understood as just that human perfection. The common good here means the end of all human actions as directed to happiness. But even the temporal happiness of human beings is short of the full perfection that is possible for humans, a perfection that is only achieved in their eternal communion with God. The political community is therefore subordinated to the happiness of its people both temporally and eternally. It can no more effect the temporal happiness of an individual person than it can effect that person's eternal happiness. This, I take it, is the thought behind the formulation of the common good as the sum total of conditions according to which individuals and groups can more fully and more easily realize their perfections adopted by the Church's social teaching since the pontificate of St. John XXIII and most authoritatively stated in the Second Vatican Council's 1965 Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*. It is, coincidentally, the best interpretation I can think of for the Declaration of Independence's creedal affirmation that all men are endowed by God with rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Just what constitutes that sum total or ensemble of conditions is a matter of practical reasoning to be carried out by citizens and officials in every community. While the official teaching of the Church since Leo XIII has been that the Church endorses no particular form of government, a number of statements from the late nineteenth and early-twentieth century seemed to condemn democracy. When read carefully, what was in fact condemned was moral relativism. The connection between this and democracy was in the notion that fifty percent plus one equals truth and just authority. The Church maintained that the source of political authority is always God. By the time of St. John XXIII this was not being said anymore; rather the relevant documents emphasized the need for political authority to be exercised in accordance with the natural moral law. These two ways of talking about the source of political authority are ultimately the same, however, since the natural moral law is promulgated for human beings through man's natural inclinations and their objects, which are goods that provide the starting points for practical reasoning. Those inclinations are grounded in the nature with which God created human beings, so reason itself participates in divine providence and its authority is therefore derived from God's. It is, therefore, through right practical reasoning about the concrete character of the common good in our community that we harmonize earth with Heaven.

The Church's role in this is the same as it has been since Pentecost, to proclaim the Kingdom of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ to every human being on the planet, and by corporal and spiritual acts of mercy to witness to the birth of a new Heaven and a new earth at the consummation of history, when no effort at harmonization will any longer be necessary. Thank you.

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