

**This article first appeared in the May 2020 Print Edition of *Catholic Family News* (click [HERE](#) to subscribe; current subscribers can access the E-Edition [HERE](#)).**

**Editor's Note:** The tragic death of George Floyd on Memorial Day (May 25, 2020) and ongoing societal chaos related to it (see [here](#) and [here](#) for CFN's coverage) make this series on Catholic Social Teaching by Dr. Peter Kwasniewski incredibly timely (see [here](#) for Part I). In this installment, Dr. Kwasniewski focuses on "Hierarchy and Egalitarianism", which encompasses themes such as the true nature of human equality and solidarity, themes which are particularly relevant as we approach the celebration of America's Independence Day (July 4). CFN thanks Dr. Kwasniewski for his scholarly insights and practical wisdom on a subject of profound importance for these times of civil unrest and violence in the streets. - Matt Gaspers, CFN Managing Editor

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## Part II: Hierarchy and Egalitarianism

The political revolutions of modernity have tended to waffle between the exaltation of unrestricted liberty (more properly termed *license*) and the enforcement of a kind of social equality that is contrary to the plan of the Creator and the good of the body politic. These two aspirations are in permanent tension: an increase of liberty necessarily increases inequality, while enforcement of equality necessarily limits liberty. In next month's column [published in the June 2020 Print Edition - Ed.], I will look at the Catholic conception of liberty and how it differs from license; in the present column, my attention will be focused on the Church's understanding of equality, which is more timely than ever, given tireless efforts on the part of political liberals to push through "equality acts" of various sorts.

### True Notion of Equality

As with most aspects of Catholic Social Teaching, it was Pope Leo XIII who offered the most thorough analysis, as he strove to give guidance to a world seduced by liberalism and at constant risk of revolutionary discord. Whereas socialists (he wrote in 1878) "proclaim the absolute equality of all men in rights and duties," the Christian tradition teaches that:

"the equality of men consists in this: that all, having inherited the same nature, are called to the same most high dignity of the sons of God, and that, as one and the same end is set before all, each one is to be judged by the same law and will receive punishment or reward according to his deserts. The inequality of rights

and of power proceeds from the very Author of nature, 'from whom all paternity in heaven and earth is named.'" ([\*Quod Apostolici Muneris\*](#), nn. 1 and 5)

Drawing upon the ancient theme of the "body politic" and the cosmic organism which, in modified form, was also a central image of St. Paul's when speaking of the Church as "body of Christ," Leo XIII's encyclical [\*Humanum Genus\*](#) (1884) elaborates further:

"No one doubts that all men are equal one to another, so far as regards their common origin and nature, or the last end which each one has to attain, or the rights and duties which are thence derived. But, as the abilities of all are not equal, as one differs from another in the powers of mind or body, and as there are very many dissimilarities of manner, disposition, and character, it is most repugnant to reason to endeavor to confine all within the same measure, and to extend complete equality to the institutions of civil life. Just as a perfect condition of the body results from the conjunction and composition of its various members, which, though differing in form and purpose, make, by their union and the distribution of each one to its proper place, a combination beautiful to behold, firm in strength, and necessary for use; so, in the commonwealth, there is an almost infinite dissimilarity of men, as parts of the whole. If they are to be all equal, and each is to follow his own will, the State will appear most deformed; but if, with a distinction of degrees of dignity, of pursuits and employments, all aptly conspire for the common good, they will present the image of a State both well constituted and conformable to nature." (n. 26)

This argument, incidentally, is nicely developed in Pius XII's Christmas Address of 1944, on true and false democracy.

At the end of *Humanum Genus*, Leo XIII takes occasion to commend the *Christian* understanding of the famous slogan of the French Revolution – *liberté, égalité, fraternité*:

"not such as the Freemasons absurdly imagine [these three], but such as Jesus Christ obtained for the human race and St. Francis aspired to: the liberty, we mean, of sons of God, through which we may be free from slavery to Satan or to our passions, both of them most wicked masters; the fraternity whose origin is in God, the common Creator and Father of all; the equality which, founded on justice and charity, does not take away all distinctions among men, but, out of the

varieties of life, of duties, and of pursuits, forms that union and that harmony which naturally tend to the benefit and dignity of society." (n. 34)

In [\*Rerum Novarum\*](#) (1891), Leo XIII judged the socialist utopia of communal property a recipe for disaster: "that ideal equality about which they entertain pleasant dreams would be in reality the leveling down of all to a like condition of misery and degradation" (n. 15) - prophetic words, given the course of the century to come, with its numerous failed experiments in Marxist "liberation" and "empowerment," although, truth be told, it cannot be said that capitalism, burdened with its own vices, has proved itself *morally* superior (cf. Pius XI, [\*Quadragesimo Anno\*](#)).

### **Authentic Solidarity**

Building on Leo XIII's heritage, Pius XII offers a profound treatment of the subject in his inaugural encyclical [\*Summi Pontificatus\*](#), written as the shadows of World War II descended over Europe in 1939. Pius XII laments a growing forgetfulness of "that law of human solidarity and charity which is dictated and imposed by our common origin and by the equality of rational nature in all men, to whatever people they belong, and by the redeeming sacrifice offered by Jesus Christ on the altar of the Cross to His heavenly Father on behalf of sinful mankind" (n. 35). From its first page Scripture teaches us that God created mankind, male and female, in His own image and for the sake of eternal beatitude, and that all generations are descended from the same first couple; thus, all men are *truly* brothers (nn. 36-37). Scripture puts before us "a marvelous vision" of manifold sources of unity: we are given to see

"the human race in the unity of one common origin in God ...; in the unity of nature which in every man is equally composed of material body and spiritual, immortal soul; in the unity of his immediate end and mission in the world; in the unity of dwelling place, the earth, of whose resources all men can by natural right avail themselves, to sustain and develop life; in the unity of his supernatural end, God Himself, to whom all should tend; in the unity of means to secure that end. It is the same Apostle who portrays for us mankind in the unity of its relations with the Son of God, image of the invisible God ...; in the unity of its ransom, effected for all by Christ, Who, through His holy and most bitter Passion, restored the original friendship with God which had been broken, making Himself the Mediator between God and men." (nn. 38-39)

Having reviewed the ultimate foundations of human solidarity, Pius XII is able to conclude: “In the light of this unity of all mankind, which exists in law and in fact, individuals do not feel themselves isolated units, like grains of sand, but united by the very force of their nature and by their internal destiny, into an organic, harmonious mutual relationship” (n. 42). The pope goes on to apply these truths to international relations and membership in the Church (nn. 43-50).

Put into systematic terms, the Catholic teaching can be presented thus: human beings – men, women, and children, without any exceptions – are equal in regard to their possession of a human nature that is rational and free, their *inherent* (but not their *actualized*) capacity for truth and moral goodness, their natural rights and the duties corresponding thereto (cf. John XXIII, [\*Pacem in Terris\*](#), nn. 8-45), their need for and obligations toward human society and its governing authorities of all kinds. All of these points rest upon their possession of human nature, by which they are constituted as *persons*. It is never permissible to treat a person as a non-person, as a mere means to some further end for the sake of which he or she can be trampled upon. Moreover, human beings are equal in regard to their vocation to the supernatural life, the life of participating in divine grace: God wishes all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of His saving truth (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4). In this regard, they are equal in the rights and duties that belong *essentially* to the Christian vocation, which would include, for example, seeking and adhering to the truth about God, receiving Baptism or any of the sacraments when properly disposed for it (a point to which many have adverted during this coronavirus crisis), embracing the religious life, and so on. No power on earth can legitimately stand in the way of the pursuit of any of these goods.

At the same time, Catholic tradition appreciates the subtle relationship that obtains between the person and the societies to which he belongs, between individual dignity and social solidarity. No man is an island, but all are, in varying ways, responsible for and accountable to others, in the service of that genuine common good that is more truly mine and yours than any purely private good. In this way, the common good as well as its support, civil law, place limits on an individual’s freedom and rights, precisely to allow and to foster the best development of each and of all (this point is a commonplace in Catholic Social Teaching: see Pius XI, [\*Divini Redemptoris\*](#) nn. 25-38, and for deeper analysis, Charles De Koninck’s *On the Primacy of the Common Good*). Human dignity is not an immutable, one-dimensional property, but, having its enduring foundation in the rational nature of man, admits of an increase in intensity as man draws nearer to his ultimate end, which is objectively God and subjectively the happiness of union with God. Man’s *actual* dignity increases or decreases in proportion to his actual stance vis-à-vis the human good, though he cannot fall so far that he lacks dignity altogether, nor can he rise so high that he possesses a dignity equal to that of his uncreated Lord. The Christian tradition is not, in this sense, egalitarian, but considers

men to be ranked objectively – though invisibly to our eyes – by the fire of charity that burns in their hearts, and the clarity of vision through which they are united to the First Truth, imaging His light (cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, [\*Summa Theologiae\*](#) I, q. 93).

### Errors of Extremes

The errors that have arisen in regard to equality are errors of extremes: on the one side, an egalitarianism that either denies *in principle* humanly significant differences, dismissing all such evaluations as “subjective” judgments, or admits their reality but views them as evils to be overcome by legislation aiming at maximal leveling-out; on the other side, the extreme of a rigid hierarchicalism that amounts to a denial, implicit or explicit, of the essential sameness of human nature in all individuals and the resultant rights and duties, as can be seen in the caste system in India or in the quondam slaveries of the New World. In the modern West, there seems to be a strange temptation to deny outright, or to downplay the significance of, the most fundamental *natural* difference, namely, that between the sexes (see the judicious commentary of Cahill, *Framework of a Christian State*, 422-50). There is also a sinister tendency to deny to whole classes of human beings (e.g., the unborn or the unconscious) the status of “persons” before the law in order to avoid acknowledging them to be equal possessors of the natural rights that belong to man as man.

We can take our analysis further by delving into the subject of aristocracy. The term “aristocracy” can be used in two senses. In a narrower sense, it refers to a form of government or regime in which the people are ruled by the *aristoi*, the “best.” In a broader sense, it refers to the presence within a society of a class, an elite, distinguished by birth, wealth, education, or unusual prowess in the defense of their fatherland (at times, all four together). If, with Aristotle, one understands “the best” as those who are noble in spirit, outstanding in virtue, paragons of practical wisdom, there may or may not be such a class, depending on the social structures that favor or militate against its formation and perdurance. Moreover, a social class is a mutable, variable thing; the passage of time can have as downward an effect on class as it can on individuals. Just as democracy can degenerate into ochlocracy or mob rule, so aristocracy can degenerate into oligarchy or the rule of the favored few for their own sakes.

While people often speak as if aristocratic regimes perished with the advent of modern democracy, one may doubt whether any people or *civitas* has ever been ruled by anything *other* than an aristocracy, whether its members be the “best” in reality or only in name. There will always be a privileged elite even in societies supposedly democratic or socialistic; one need only think of the *nomenklatura* of the former Soviet Union, who enjoyed the best apartments, cars, and food, or the Kennedys of the United States.

The first thing to clear away is the prejudice that the Christian tradition is essentially anti-hierarchical, that it promotes a utopia where everyone is equal in every respect, endowed with the same rights and privileges. The New Testament makes it plain that the overriding concern of early Christians was liberation from the slavery of sin and the conquest of personal pride. St. Paul rejoices in the paradoxes of the Gospel: "He who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord; likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. ... So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God" (1 Cor. 7:22). The Apostle's perspective was that social distinctions, though they often do arise from sins, are not the spiritual context within which the Christian must learn to live and move and have his being. When he says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28), he is not uttering a slogan of communist revolution, but exulting in the unspeakable mystery of communion with the risen Savior.

For St. Paul, as for the other witnesses of the New Testament, there will *always* be both the rich and the poor (cf. Mark 14:7; Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8), the powerful and the powerless (cf. Matt. 20:25; Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13), the famous and the obscure, the cultured and the coarse. The decisive question, in a way the *only* question, is: Where is your *heart* (cf. Matt. 6:21)? Undoubtedly the more a man turns toward the Lord, the further he will move away from earthly weights and measures, and the more he will think with the mind of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 2:16; Rom. 8:6-9, 12:2; Phil. 2:1-5). Hence, although Christianity is not egalitarianism – it is no abstract theory, but a life of friendship with Jesus – it fosters a radical re-evaluation of worldly rank and privilege, leading the disciple ever more deeply into the self-abnegation of the Crucified King.

### **A Balanced View of Aristocracy**

It has been a temptation throughout the Christian centuries to consider any privileged class to be, *ipso facto*, an embodiment of injustice toward the underprivileged. The propaganda machine of the French Revolution was particularly successful in projecting a purely negative image of the *ancien régime* and its nobility. Yet one ought neither to exaggerate the vices of the aristocracy nor overlook their conspicuous virtues. What is certain is that elite classes of all ages have been responsible for great good *and* for great evil, in accordance with the ancient principle *corruptio optimi pessima*. Many who were born and bred aristocrats attained their sanctity within that social sphere—well-known examples being Elizabeth of Hungary, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas More, Francis Borgia (or more correctly, Francisco de Borja y Aragon), and the long list of royal saints who have graced European history, most recently the last reigning monarch of the Habsburg dynasty, Karl I (1887-1922). It bears noting that, without exception, these saintly individuals practiced asceticism, suffered



misunderstanding and at times persecution from others in their class, and, when they did not actually renounce position and power, distributed their wealth lavishly to the needy. Many of the saints discussed in Ferdinand Holböck's beautiful book *Married Saints and Blesseds Through the Centuries* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002) belonged to the nobility of their age.

There is likewise no need to hide the fact that "upper" classes have perpetrated outrageous crimes against "lower" classes, as when the *de facto* aristocracy constituted by Spaniards in South America or by the English in North America treated indigenous Americans with such callous brutality that passionate protests were raised in the name of basic human rights (the great Dominicans Francesco de Vitoria and Bartholomé de Las Casas come to mind). Grievous exploitation of the poor, or a blind eye to the same, has been all too familiar a feature of the relationship between "upper" and "lower" classes in Western history, and there can be no denying that this scandal and suffering had an enormous part to play in the violent upheavals of modernity. In the political sphere especially, authority has too often not been directed to the common good of the ruled but to the private good of the ruler or of special interest groups; something similar can be seen in the manner in which bishops, religious superiors, or husbands and fathers have ruled, at times, more for their own comfort and convenience than for the genuine good of their charges. The rise of liberalism (including feminism) is, at least in part, a reaction against real abuses, even as Protestantism, the progenitor of modern liberalism, gained plausibility for its dissent in light of the laxity and confusion of the late medieval Church.

It may come as a surprise that the Church's magisterium contains official teaching directed to aristocrats, detailing their rights and duties. The main source of this teaching was Pope Pius XII, himself a Roman aristocrat, who combined a profound grasp of political history with a clear-sighted awareness of the crises of modernity. "A careful reading of the documents of the pontiffs prior and subsequent to Pius XII reveals that he alone treated the issue of nobility methodically, explaining its nature and its past and present mission" (Raymond E. Drake, in Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira, *Nobility and Analogous Traditional Elites in the Allocutions of Pius XII: A Theme Illuminating American Social History* [N.p.: Hamilton Press, 1993], xviii; the fascinating allocutions of this pope to the Roman patriciate and nobility from 1940 to 1958 are collected in de Oliveira's *Nobility*, 431-61). Pope Benedict XV's stirring allocution of January 1920 to the same distinguished group goes so far as to speak of the "priesthood of the nobility," exhorting nobles throughout the world to set a worthy example in speech, dress, and manners, to preserve and promote "the intellectual patrimony" of Christendom, and to practice their holy faith fearlessly and fervently (de Oliveira, 463-65).

## Conclusion

With arguments from reason and from Scripture, the Catholic Church has always supported the “both/and” of social ethics: the justice of social stratification, that is, inequality based on virtue, effort, and position; the overarching equality of human nature and of the baptismal vocation of the Christian, which allows no cancellation or abrogation. These two truths are tightly bound by the principle that hierarchy is for the sake of the common good, and the common good is most of all attained in the Beatific Vision, where all the blessed are fully happy in the possession of the sovereign good, while enjoying God in different degrees based on their charity in this life. The cardinal principle here on earth, therefore, is this: that which is higher or better or stronger is for the sake of service to that which is lowlier, needier, and weaker, for the building up of the entire social organism in justice and in bonds of friendship. The old axiom is forever true: *servire est regnare*, to serve is to reign.

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